

HAMLET.

CHAPTER FIRST.—PRELIMINARY TOPICS.

Hamlet is the Sphinx of modern literature. The difference of opinion concerning its purport and character is quite as general as the study of the work. Persons of the same grade of culture and ability hold the most contradictory theories respecting its signification; even the same persons change their notions about it at different periods of life. To others, again, it remains an unsolved mystery. Yet, curious to say, everybody recurs to this play as if it possessed some strange fascination over the mind—as if it had some secret nourishment for the spirit of man which always drew him back to take repeated draughts. A work to which intelligence thus clings must be something more than an idle riddle—in fact, it must lay open some of the profoundest problems of life. Even to appreciate and comprehend such a problem when stated requires no ordinary degree of culture and thought. Every individual brings his own intellectual capacity to the comprehension

of the play, and it is no wonder that people differ so much, since they have so many different mental measuring-rods. If one man has a deeper or shallower insight than another, there must be a corresponding difference of opinion. Also, advancing years bring along great spiritual mutations; new views of life and broader experience must reveal different phases in *Hamlet*, if it be that absolute work which enlightened mankind generally believe it to be. Hence we may account for the frequent occurrence of a change of opinion respecting it in the same person at the several periods of life. Indeed, a man ought, perhaps, to change his opinion concerning this drama once every decade during the first forty years of existence: it would, in most cases, be a good sign of increased culture and maturer intellect. According to our own premises, therefore, we can hardly expect to satisfy all, or the majority, or even ourselves after the lapse of years; when we have done, it is expected that the theories will still be conflicting. But we intend to grapple honestly with its difficulties, which are both many and great, and attempt to state the thought which gives unity to its widely diversified parts.

The play is a series of problems, of perplexing questions, concerning which opinions in every way contradictory have been held. The most important, as well as the most disputed, of these problems is the insanity of Hamlet. But, after taking away this question of insanity, there still remains a very great difference of opinion. In

regard to the character of Hamlet, one man considers him to be courageous—another, cowardly; one, that he is moral in the highest degree—another, that he is wicked; one, that he possesses vast energy of will—another, that he has little or no power of action. The same diversity of judgment exists in regard to the play as a Whole. It has been condemned as the wild work of a barbarian; it has been praised as the highest product of modern Art. Between these two extremes almost every shade of opinion has had its representative. Even Goethe, speaking through one of his characters, denies its unity; he declares that they are many things—such as the story of Fortinbras, the journey of Laertes to France, the sending of Hamlet to England—which have no justification in the thought of the work. That is, if it be a true totality, we must find some higher solution, and some more adequate and comprehensive statement, than that of Goethe. In fact, most of these conflicting opinions may, in this way, be harmonized; they are not absolutely false, but only partial, views, which become erroneous by laying claim to universality.

Hamlet is, indeed, a sort of universal man; in him every individual sees on some side a picture of himself; each one bears away what he comprehends, and often thinks it is all. If Goethe—whose criticism of this play in *Wilhelm Meister* is undoubtedly the best that has yet been given—complained of the many external and unnecessary incidents, our difficulty, be it said with all the

respect due to so great a genius, is quite of the opposite kind—we are compelled to supply so much. The poet has left so many faint outlines, and even wide gaps, to be filled up by the thought and imagination, that we would find here, if anywhere, a blemish in the construction of the drama. He ought rather to have taken a whole volume and a whole life for his work, as Goethe himself did in his *Faust*. But the defense of Shakespeare is at hand. He wrote for representation, which is an essential side of the drama; hence the limits which it imposed upon his Art must be respected. In the space of a few hours he develops what might be the theme of the grandest epic. He has been forced to drop much that would otherwise be necessary, and the missing links must be supplied if one wishes to grasp the connecting thought of the piece. It will be seen that, for this reason, we shall often have to go outside of the poem and bridge over the chasms—for which work, however, the poet always furnishes the hint. But let it not be understood by this that we are correcting the defects of the play, or even completing what was before imperfect; besides the presumptuousness of the attempt, such a proceeding is destructive of all true criticism, whose duty cannot be to supply the deficiencies of a work of Art, or to see in it things which do not exist. Still what, the latent, yet necessary thought of the piece, requires, is to be unfolded into vision by the expositor.

I. *Hamlet's Insanity*. At the very threshold stands the question of Hamlet's insanity. Was it

real or feigned? If he is insane, and so intended by the poet, let us shut the book and say no more; for, certainly, there is nothing more to be said. But even on general principles we cannot grant that such is the case. Art is the expression of Reason, and that, too, of the Reason of a nation, of an age, of an epoch; eliminate this principle—pray what is left? Criticism, if it be true to its highest end, points out and unfolds the rational element in a drama or other work of Art; but here it could only say, this poem professedly depicts the Irrational—hence the Ugly. A work which has as its theme the Ugly cannot well possess much beauty. Moreover, what delight or instruction can there be in the portraiture of the Irrational? Think of the choicest spirits of this and former generations finding spiritual nourishment in the capricious oddities of a madman! In fact, this play would thus become repugnant alike to the intellectual and the moral nature of man; repugnant to his intellectual nature, for it would be stripped of all true intelligence in the dethronement of Reason; repugnant to his moral nature, for insanity destroys responsibility, and thus Hamlet could in nowise be held accountable for his acts.

Here lies the greatest objection to the above-mentioned view: it takes away the notion of responsibility, and, thereby, blasts the very germ of the play. That the poet intends no such thing seems very evident. Shakespeare has shown us characters passing into insanity on ethical grounds, in consequence of some violation; but

to write a book on insanity is not his purpose. Hamlet has the profoundest feeling of duty—the most sensitive moral nature. Moreover, the termination of his career at the end of the play shows how Shakespeare would have us regard the matter. To destroy an insane man for his deeds would be, not merely an absurdity, but a moral horror.

The view that Hamlet is mad has lately been promulgated with much emphasis by several physicians who have had large experience in the treatment of the insane. Their method of procedure is curious—resting upon a wholly physical basis, though they are judging a work of Art. They carefully reckon up the symptoms, and show the various stages—evidently regarding the unfortunate Prince as one of their own patients, and the whole play as a treatise on insanity. One is at first inclined to think that these doctors ought to take the place of their patients, and be incarcerated for a while in an insane asylum. Yet we should not, perhaps, blame them; for does not everybody read into *Hamlet* his own life-experience and culture? Why not let these men read into it their own insanity in peace? In fact, more insanity has been shown by certain writers on Hamlet's insanity, than was ever shown by Hamlet himself. Cellular pathology has been called in to explain it; Hamlet's brain has been actually dissected, and the very brain-cell pointed out, whose collapse produced his mental aberration. In defining his madness,

the words of Polonius have been literally verified:

For, to define true madness,
What is it but to be nothing else but mad?

But such a writer is exceptional, and only worthy of notice as showing the physical method in its excess. Most of the doctors who support the theory of Hamlet's insanity are very careful and moderate in their statements, coolly scientific, we may say; but we cannot help thinking their procedure inapposite. The experts, however, do not agree among themselves; some would put Hamlet into the insane asylum, some would not; so the authority of science can be cited on both sides, and leaves us just where we were, to help ourselves out by other means. After all, the best method is to take the whole play into our vision, and let its complete light shine upon the parts. And the whole play, holding Hamlet responsible for his deeds, especially for what may be considered his insanest deed—the killing of Polonius—moves in a direction opposite to that of insanity. Still, it must be granted that Hamlet is not altogether healthy; he shows a disordered state of feeling, but no unhinging of the mind, in spite of what Ophelia and others say in the course of the drama.

A modification of this medical opinion is that Hamlet is deranged in some of his faculties, though not in all—is mad at times, with lucid intervals, etc. These views are hardly worthy of a detailed examination; in them all definiteness fades away; their supporters are evidently on both sides, and

on neither. But a true criterion may be laid down to guide our wandering steps in this trackless waste of uncertainty. *Hamlet is never so mad as not to be responsible.* Hence, with any ordinary definition of insanity, he is not mad at all. He has, undoubtedly, weaknesses—so has every mortal. He possesses finite sides to his character and intelligence; otherwise, he could hardly perish as the hero of a tragedy. A definition of insanity which includes Hamlet would sweep at least three-fourths of mankind into the mad-house. That he is lacking in the element of will, that he is melancholy in his feelings, that his reasoning is often unsound and, in fact, so intended by himself, is all very true, but does not make out a case of insanity. He assumes madness for a special purpose, and says so when he speaks of his antic disposition; nothing can be plainer than this purpose throughout the entire play. He took a mask to conceal his own designs, to discover the secrets of the King and to deceive the court, and, particularly, Polonius, the sharp-scented detective, who was sure to be placed upon his track.

It is manifest that Hamlet wishes to produce the impression of an insane man—a thing which a really insane man would hardly seek to do. Mad people are not so eager to play mad, but rather to play sane. At this point there seems to be a great hitch in the argument of the doctors. They say that when Hamlet speaks of putting on “an antic disposition,” it shows, not a disguised but a real, madness, inasmuch as insane people are very subtle

in excusing their eccentric conduct, even when they cannot help it, and in hiding their insanity. Very true; but this is just the opposite of the case of Hamlet, who wishes to conceal his sanity rather, and to make the world believe he is insane. An insane man trying to feign an insanity which he already has without feigning, is, then, Hamlet; if this be his condition, there can be no further doubt, not only of Hamlet's, but of Shakespeare's madness.

Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is often held to be a mark of an unsettled mind. It is harsh, but we must see the provocation. She who ought to love him and cling to him, has believed the dishonoring suspicions of her father and brother, and sent back his tokens. Then she has allowed herself to become the instrument of his enemies, whereat a sane man might be led to exclaim: "Get thee to a nunnery."

His ultimate object was to find out the guilt of the King; for this purpose he deemed it necessary to divert the attention of the court—headed and guided in its opinions by Polonius—as far as possible from the design of which he might otherwise be suspected. But why should he take the special form of insanity to hide his plans? This was determined by the character of Polonius, who was no fool, but very astute in his particular calling—who had, therefore, to be caught in his own net. That trait of his character in which all others were resumed was cunning. Now, Hamlet was known to the court as a man of profound candor and

earnestness, and disinclined to all trickery and deceit; hence, to meet Polonius, he had to reverse his entire nature and reputation. But how would everybody regard this sudden transformation? Either in its true light as a disguise, in which case the whole design of it would fail, or that the man had lost his wits. Hence Hamlet, in order to conceal his plans and thoughts, had to counterfeit madness; such was the impression that he was compelled to make upon the world. Thus he had a veil, beneath which he could be cunning, too, and indulge in all sorts of vagaries without exciting suspicion, and could thwart Polonius and the other court spies on all sides. Such was his great and sudden change, which has so mystified both King and court.

Yet Hamlet, once started in his disguise, begins to take pleasure in it; he seems to find a certain relief in playing an assumed part—a relief from his internal struggles; though not insane, he takes an insane delight in feigning insanity. He is fond of plotting, sporting, mocking, masking, loves the theatre, and is often a most theatrical sort of a person. What an actor! we have to cry out at times; truly a hypocrite, in the old sense of the word, we have to call him. Yet this is but the outside of him; he is also deeply in earnest, has the most sensitive moral nature, and a conscience responsive to every whisper of duty. Under his mask he is bearing up the burden of a world. No doubt he takes delight in disguise; though he has the profoundest motive for feigning insanity, he

feigns it sometimes without motive. The twofold element of his nature—sincerity and dissimulation—is to be grasped together into one character.

Moreover, Hamlet was intimate with Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, and had been dismissed by the father's orders; here was just what was wanted, namely, a ground to give Polonius for the theory of Hamlet's madness—love for Ophelia. This ground Hamlet furnishes him; the self-conceit of the old courtier, mixed with paternal pride, quite led him astray; besides, he did not, and could not, comprehend the profound ethical nature of Hamlet, who had a deep, underlying motive for the disguise. Still, Polonius sometimes half suspects the truth, for he cannot but observe that there is method in Hamlet's madness.

Such are the reasons why Hamlet had to feign insanity. He was the self-chosen instrument of a mighty design, which, however, for a time, required concealment; concealment demanded cunning; cunning was the reversal of his entire rational nature; still, to carry out his end, he had to submit to the circumstances, and to assume the garb of the Irrational. How perfectly our poet has succeeded in portraying this disguise is shown by the fact that quite a number of modern critics have been deceived as badly as Polonius. They maintain that Hamlet is mad; that his profound intelligence, and his deep, conscious planning, mean nothing, or, to cite the expression of one of them, that "madness is compatible with *some* of the ripest and richest manifestations of intellect;" whereof Hamlet is an

example. Just the thought of old Polonius. Hear him: "How pregnant, *sometimes*, his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of." We cannot but regard those persons who believe in the madness of Hamlet as in the condition of Polonius in the play—most completely befooled by Hamlet's disguise, and laughed at by the poet himself. If, too, the leading characters of the play are considered, but little will be found to justify the hypothesis of Hamlet's madness. Besides Polonius, only the two women—the Queen and Ophelia—neither of whom was strong enough to have an independent opinion, take Hamlet to be mad. The King, though a little doubtful at first, soon knows better, and acts upon his conviction to the end; moreover, Horatio, the most intimate friend and chosen vindicator of Hamlet, does not seem to have the remotest notion of the insanity of Hamlet.

The people of the play, however, like the readers of it, divide into two main parties on the question of Hamlet's madness. It is a great problem at court; there the two theories were held which have been held ever since, and will be held forever. The poet takes into his play the audience of centuries and its doubt; each person must see the solution for himself, or leave it unseen. Indeed, Hamlet himself divides on his own question; he calls himself mad and not mad, even argues that he is and is not mad, in different places. Still further, when he speaks of the same act—his wild

conduct at the grave of Ophelia—he calls it madness at one time, and something else at another time. Speaking of it to Horatio, his bosom friend (Act V. Sc. 2), he says, “I forgot myself,” and that he was put “into a towering passion.” But speaking of it to Laertes a little later, in the presence of the court, by way of apology he calls it madness, and proceeds to give a mad account of himself. Here it is manifest that the difference of occasion produces the difference of statement. His disguise is not for Horatio, but for the court. But such an adjustment to the situation is not the work of a madman.

Still another theory on this subject is possible, and has been maintained. It is that Hamlet is neither mad nor feigns madness. To most readers, doubtless, such a view contradicts the whole tenor of the play. Hamlet has certainly made the impression of an insane man upon the members of the court generally, except the King; are they, then, the mad people? Also, he has endeavored to produce just that impression; both his intention and its effect can hardly be explained away. It may be said that Hamlet is only acting his own nature in his wild freaks; that this is the permanent element of his character—to play the madman. But this, too, is simulation; besides, if there is one thing emphasized, it is the great change which has come over him—our much-changed son he is called. Certainly his present conduct is so different from what it has been that the whole court are trying to find the cause of the transformation. But,

if it were Hamlet's nature from youth to act as he now acts, it certainly would not be such a matter of surprise and sharp inquiry.

The theories concerning Hamlet's madness may be classed under three heads: First, that his madness is real; second, that it is feigned; third, that it is neither real nor feigned. Even a fourth theory may be distinguished—that it is both real and feigned. These shade into each other, forming almost every variety of opinion; indeed, they are sometimes combined into a startling contradiction, as, for example, in the statement that Hamlet is both mad and is feigning madness. It is hard, assuredly, to draw the line; the sole anchor in this ocean of opinion would seem to be the insight—*Hamlet is never so mad as not to be responsible.*

But the theory of feigned insanity has a very grave difficulty which the other theories do not have, and which, probably, compelled them into being. What is the motive of the man? What good is to be gained by such a pretense? Nay, does not this simulated madness add new difficulties to his situation? He would seem of himself to have given to the King the very best pretext for putting him out of the way by incarcerating him in a mad-house. Even his great popularity could not help him, for the people would say, a madman can not be allowed to run loose. It has even been brought forward as an argument that the best proof of real insanity is to feign insanity under such circumstances. Hardly any two writers agree about the purpose of this strange simulation, and

the poet here, as on so many other points, gives no decisive clew. So the apple of discord is thrown among the supporters of the doctrine of feigned insanity, after having valiantly defended their cause against its enemies. It is said that Hamlet's object was to conceal his own thoughts, to assassinate secretly the King, to escape without responsibility, to amuse himself by confounding others—there is no end to the various motives assigned. Some have held that the disguise was not necessary to effect Hamlet's purpose; others have even thought that it was in the way of his success. Hence it was a mistake, his first great mistake, from which all the tragic consequences flowed. But we have already traveled too far in this primeval chaos of conjecture. So much may be finally said: Hamlet's insanity is feigned, his immediate object being to deceive Polonius and the court, in order that he might more surely pursue his greater and more ultimate object—the discovery and punishment of the King's guilt.

II. *The Question of Time in the Drama.*—Time has introduced an element of discord; the action seems, to one person, to last ten days; to another, ten years. Neither period can be sustained by precise facts and figures; the essential links are always made of conjectures—usually a very weak material. The poet, however, wants to avoid the arithmetical, and to excite the imaginative, faculty; accordingly it may be confessed that the action seems long—indeed, a good life-time. *Hamlet* is a grand development, which cannot

shoot up in twenty-four hours—the sufficient limit of many a good French play. You must appear to live with it—develop with it; it should make Time long instead of short; and, on the other hand, we must not infer that it drags, causing weariness; a great deal of movement is here and rapid movement—no stagnation. The action is both rapid and long; the two qualities are not inconsistent—as a long and busy life, for instance. The longer it seems the more the reader is likely to be obtaining from it; let him not hurry to the end of it any more than to the end of his own life. So it will continue, no doubt, to seem short to some, and long to others; two such classes of readers do, indeed, exist for every good book. Both acceleration and retardation have been skillfully pointed out in *Hamlet* and elsewhere in Shakespeare; but the deeper fact is, not this difference of dramatic time, but the unity underlying it, wherein fast and slow become one.

The same trouble exists with the age of Hamlet. A youth at the beginning, and thirty or more years old at the end, of the play—strange inconsistency! Whereat still stranger proposals of compromise—let us add the extremes and divide the sum by two, which gets, say, twenty-four years as the fixed and unchangeable age of Hamlet in the future. “O horrible! O horrible! most horrible!” May the writer say that, for him, instead of having ten or a dozen years of Hamlet’s life-picture from Shakespeare’s hand, he would have been glad to have started with the Danish Prince as a baby, and

had his life prolonged to four-score, like the aged Faust. Yes, Hamlet is a growth—must be seized as a growth; but of growth the outer setting is time. Hamlet as merely young, and Hamlet as merely old, are equally absurd.

When shall it be comprehended that the real forms of Time and Place are ruthlessly sacrificed by Shakespeare? Time-Probability, Place-Probability—all external probabilities are employed by him to express his thought; to it everything must yield as the supreme object. Why must we continue to hear that wretched category, Probability, applied to the creative Imagination; to the author of specters, ghosts, fairies, witches; to the creator of ideal worlds, with their own Space and Time?

III. *The Dramatic Collision.*—First of all, in importance, is the collision, which constitutes the basis of the action of the entire play, and which lies between Hamlet and the King. They form the most wonderful contrast, yet both exhibit sides of the same great thought. Hamlet has morality without action, the King has action without morality. Hamlet cannot do his deed at the behest of duty, nor can the King undo—that is, repent of—his deed at the command of conscience. Hamlet represents the undone which should be done, the King represents the done which should be undone. Neither reaches the goal which reason so clearly sets before them, and both perish by the inherent contradiction of their lives. Each seeks the death of the other, and, by the most rigid poetic justice, they die by the retribution of

their deeds.

Hamlet has the most powerful motives which can urge the human breast; his struggle is with one who has murdered his father, debauched his mother, and usurped, if not his throne, at least his chance of the succession. These facts are not revealed to him of a sudden in all their fullness—it is the course of the poem to unfold them gradually before his mind; but even at the beginning his prophetic soul surmised the whole truth. It is a curious psychological fact that sensitive natures often feel that of which they have no information; instinct and presentiment seem to supply the place of knowledge. The melancholy of Hamlet, at the very outset, shows his morbid activity of feeling, though there is a partial motive in the conduct of his mother, which is known to him. But when the guilt of the King is as clear as day, he does not act. Why? The answer to this question must give the first necessary insight into his character.

Let us make, once more, the oft-repeated comparison with the Greek view, for there is an excellent opportunity. In the legend of Orestes, who has been so frequently contrasted with Hamlet, notably by Herder and Gervinus, we see the same content—father murdered, mother debauched, throne usurped. But Orestes, true to the tragic instinct of Greece, is one with his end; he marches directly to it by the deepest necessity of his nature. He never stops to reflect on the character of his act; he never for a moment doubts what he is to do; nothing can possibly interpose itself between

him and his deed. To be sure, if that deed were wrong, the dreadful Furies might pursue him with their terrors; but they were something external to him, with which he, in the main, had nothing to do. In other words, he never asked, never could ask, himself, in a moral sense, the question: Is this act right or wrong? There was his dead father; his only duty was revenge. He might thereby commit another crime equally great, but this reflection he did not make. He did not possess what is now called a moral consciousness; nor was it possessed, except in an embryonic state, by the Grecian world, for it is the special product of the modern spirit of Christendom.

Now, if we add this moral element to Orestes, we shall in all essential features have Hamlet. Its leading characteristic is to react against the end proposed—to call it into question, and to test the same by its own criteria. Hamlet is impelled by the strongest incentives to kill the King—such is one side; but the other side comes up before him with appalling strength—have I the right to kill him? And here it is important to inquire into the nature of this right which has such authority with Hamlet. It is not law, it is not custom, nor even public opinion—indeed, it would defy all these if it came into conflict with them; it is, therefore, nothing established and possessing objective validity. Moreover, mankind would, for the most part, justify him if he slew the King. Hence it is *himself*, his own subjectivity, which he sets up as the absolute umpire of his actions. He cannot satisfy

himself that he should do the deed, however great the other considerations may be which impel him to do it. Here we see the moral consciousness in its extreme expression; it is the assertion of the right of the individual to determine the nature of his act. That the modern world gives validity to this right need not be told to the reader. It is commonly called conscience in the wider, and not strictly religious, use of the word; by it the individual claims the privilege of determining his own action *through himself*, against all demands of objective institutions, as State, Law, or any established authority.

In Hamlet these two sides are in the most direct contradiction. He acknowledges both principles; he thinks it to be his sacred duty to avenge his father—at the same time he feels the unspeakable iniquity and misery of murder. The difficulty is he cannot subordinate these two principles of action; at one moment the one is uppermost, but the next moment the other is stronger. Such is the terrible struggle which rends his heart asunder and destroys his peace of mind. It should be observed that in his language he dwells more upon his revenge, and he tries to goad himself onward to it, but there is always the moral scruple which stays his hand. The presupposition of the entire play is the moral nature of Hamlet; hence it is not brought into prominence directly, but is always implied as the element which he is trying to overcome; it is the native stock, which he is attempting to inoculate with a new resolution.

Nor are his scruples without foundation. He is seeking revenge, which means that he is taking justice into his own hands. But thus he commits a new wrong, which, in its turn, begets another wrong—the result of which conduct, as exhibited in history, is the feud which transmits itself from generation to generation. It is the annulment of law for the individual to administer the law in his own case. There is, therefore, an institution of society—the court of justice—before which the criminal is to be cited to receive the penalty due to his crimes. But, in the present instance, the criminal happens to be the King himself—the very fountain of justice and authority. His trial would, in consequence, be a mockery—a contradiction in terms. What remains? Only this: That, if the King is to be punished at all, it must be by the individual—by Hamlet. Thus the deed is thrown back upon him, single and alone, with all its consequences and responsibilities. Here we see the internal conflict, which always palsied the arm of Hamlet; it was a fearful struggle, which may well excite our pity and terror—he would not, yet he could; he could not, yet he would.

It is just at this point that we must seek for the tragic element in Hamlet's character. Tragedy is not merely stage-slaughter. In its true significance it exhibits a collision of duties, which duties may have equal validity in the breast of the hero; he perishes beneath their strife, because he knows not how to subordinate them. Here also may be noticed an essential distinction between ancient

and modern tragedy. In the former, the character is the bearer of one end alone—each individual has his single object to accomplish, in the execution of which he lays his whole existence; hence the collision is more external, and between the different individuals who have different ends. But modern tragedy, while it has this element, too, possesses in its most complete manifestations an additional principle; it makes the collision internal as well as external. The same individual has two different and contradictory ends, both of which demand realization; thus there is a double collision—with himself on the one hand, and with the external individual on the other.

Here the poet might stop, basing his characterization of Hamlet wholly upon this moral element; here some critics very positively state that he does stop. They declare that Hamlet's unwillingness to act proceeds from his doubt concerning the King's guilt; that his conscience alone keeps him from sweeping to the deed. Unquestionably he hates murder from the bottom of his soul—especially murder for an unproved crime. Still, when the crime is proved, and he says and believes that it is proved, he does not act. Something else, therefore, belongs to his character; a higher synthesis of it must be made, not neglecting its moral side. The hesitation of Hamlet springs, not merely from his conscience, but also from his intellect; it lies in his mental, as well as in his moral, composition.

IV. *Psychology of Hamlet.*—We are now ready for the complete statement of the conflict

in Hamlet's mind. It involves in its sweep, not only the moral, but also the entire intellectual, nature of man. Conscience being also a phase of mind, the whole may be summed up in the expression—subjective Intelligence versus Will. We shall revert for a moment to our former illustration taken from the Greeks. They lacked, not only the moral consciousness above mentioned, but the whole realm of which it is only a part—the absolute mediation of spirit with itself; in other words, subjectivity in its highest form, or, to employ still another expression, the complete thought of Freedom. On the theoretical side this is seen in their doctrine of Fate, which at last ruled the King of Gods and Men—the mighty Jupiter. An external power thus controls even the Absolute; the highest, after all, has over itself a higher. But it is most plainly observed, in the practical affairs of the Greeks, every important action was determined by omens, by oracles, by prophetic utterances; the greatest generals never gave battle without consulting the sacrifices. This custom, so strange to our ways of thinking, was founded upon an essential limitation of the Grecian spirit. It demanded this external impulse, and no Greek could, as we say, make up his mind—that is, have his mind determine out of its own activity, from its own infinite depths, what was to be done. This element, which will, perhaps, be better understood by the contrast with the Greeks, who did not have it, must be also added to Hamlet, in order to embrace all the elements of his character.

Hence between Hamlet and his deed is interposed what may be called the entire world of subjectivity. It is, moreover, this world in its oneness, without the objectifying element of Will. We have dwelt upon one phase of this principle—moral consciousness; but it has many phases, and, indeed, includes the whole sphere of Intelligence as distinguished from Will. The fact is, therefore, to be emphasized that Hamlet represents the entire range of subjective spirit. This has three leading forms, each of which we shall find in excessive development in Hamlet.

The first and lowest of these forms is the emotional principle of man's nature, which includes the feelings, presentiments, impulses—all of which are important elements in Hamlet's character, and sometimes are found in morbid activity. It is the dark realm of the Unconscious, in which the guiding light of reason may be dimmed or quite extinguished. So, it will be seen, when Hamlet follows impulse, not only all rational action is destroyed, but he becomes a criminal. The excess of emotion and passion, in which Hamlet is generally portrayed by the poet, is highly characteristic of a subjective nature, which must always lack that calmness and steadiness which result from a conscious mastery over the objective world.

The second form is what may be termed the phenomenal principle of mind, in which the subject become conscious of itself on the one hand, and of an external world of reality on the

other. Upon this world of reality the mind now imposes its own subjective forms—applies its own one-sided predicates to all the manifold phases of existence. Thus the whole objective world, from the realm of nature upwards, may be completely transformed by being passed through a peculiar mental medium. To its glance this world only appears to be—is phenomenal, and often phenomenally bad. Now, Hamlet exhibits many characteristics of such a state of mind. He cannot see the rationality of the world; it is a dire, horrible phantasm, which he would be glad to leave in a hurry.

—Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.

Thus he did not look at the moral order of the universe in its true reality, but as transmuted in its passage through his own discolored mind. Indeed, sometimes even his sensations and perceptions of external objects seem to be affected in the same way, as Coleridge has observed. There is an expression of his, which, though it probably has a different shade of meaning in the connection where it is found, may, nevertheless be applied here—“there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” The predominance of this phenomenal principle has its culmination in the unreal ghostly element of the play—a side which will be considered more fully in another place, when we come to treat of the Ghost.

The third form of subjective spirit is the reflec-

tive, which is the most important of all, in the consideration of Hamlet. In the first sphere—the emotional—mental operations were unconscious and instinctive; in the second—the phenomenal—we see the realm of consciousness begin, and the mind busied with the objective world; but now, in third, it goes back to itself and grasps its own doings. The mind turns from the contemplation of external reality, which trait it showed in the last phase—the phenomenal—and looks at itself, feeds upon its own operations. This is the extreme of subjectivity; the intellect is pushed to the very limit of its own negation, and, unless it can make the logical transition to the Will, it must remain forever entangled in its own meshes. Consider its condition. The mind retires in upon itself, and looks at its own operations; this process, however, is a mental process, and, in its turn must be scanned; this step, too, being like the preceeding, demands examination as well as they; the result is, an infinite series in which the mind is hopelessly caught, and in which all action must perish. Such is what we call Reflection—an interminable passing from one subjective notion to another, which, in its fundamental nature, is mere repetition. Here is the point where we must seize the character of Hamlet in its concentration; here we must place the limit beyond which he cannot finally stir. This finitude, which he cannot overcome, is the ultimate cause of his ruin.

If we examine the above-mentioned principles with care, we think that from them can be deduced

the main peculiarities of Hamlet's character, and its seeming contradictions can be understood. We can thus account for the tendency of his mind to play with itself—to seek out hidden relations in every direction. We can thus comprehend how he is so perfectly conscious of all his states, and even of his weaknesses; for Hamlet knows what is the matter with himself, and declares it in the bitterest language of self-denunciation. His fondness for quibbling, which seeks the hidden relations of words, is one phase of this same element; his tendency to spin out a notion into all its relations is another—the one finding its material in language, the other in thought. His intellectual keenness in deceiving, in feigning madness, in discovering the plans of his enemies, in reading the thoughts and intentions of others who are sent to pump him or ensnare him, and in many other similar cases, shows him the master of every form of subjective intelligence. He could cast himself into these infinite Protean shapes—could even carry them out as individual acts, but the ultimate purpose of them all was a fruit which he could never reach. Finally, the moral consciousness before spoken of must be referred to this head; for it is only the subjective element claiming the right to determine the deed, demanding that therein it be satisfied, and, in the case of Hamlet, refusing to be satisfied.

Moreover, many of the weak elements of Hamlet's character spring from the same source. Hence his procrastination; for his mind cannot free itself from the net of its own working so as to translate

itself into objectivity. He resolves on the death of the King, even with passion; he places his end before himself, even with violence; but that end is subjective, and, hence, exposed to the endless twistings and curvetings of Reflection, so that it at last is buried beneath the confusion. His sporting with possibilities also finds its basis here; for the mind is the world of possibilities; they only exist in it, and are hardly to be found in the world of actuality. Here, then, is a glorious field for the exercise of his peculiar faculty; what may be is ever before his mind, and has quite as much validity as what is—nay, sometimes more. Again, how perfect are the excuses which he can frame for not acting, as in the case when he refuses to strike the fatal blow while the King is at prayer, lest the latter might go to heaven! Nobody knew better than Hamlet the absurdity of such a proposition, yet it is good enough for a pretext. But all these psychological peculiarities, of which the play is full, need not be stated, for they have the same logical basis.

Such is the most general form of the internal collision in Hamlet. He is the grand representative of the entire realm of subjectivity, and he exhibits its finitude and its negation in his own fate; for subjective spirit—mere intelligence without activity—cannot save a human being. Man must be able, not merely to understand the world, but to create it anew in a certain degree; not merely to translate it into the forms of his own mind, but to impose his own forms upon it—to make it the

bearer of his own ends. Thus only can he assert his universality. Hamlet knows of action in its highest sense, since he is master of the world of thought, yet he cannot attain to it, though perpetually striving after it. He cannot realize his plan; he cannot make himself valid in the objective world but to a limited degree, and, so far as he falls short of this, he can hardly be called an actual being, since he—his mind, his thought—has no existence in the world of reality. How, then, can he continue to live? It must be found in the end that he has not strength of individuality sufficient to maintain life. He complains of the external world, which is always intruding upon his privacy and disturbing his quiet intercourse with himself; he even meditates to end this “sea of troubles” by ending his own existence. It is a troublesome world, indeed, which, if it be not controlled, must necessarily control.

V. *Hamlet's Action and Non-Action.*—But it is not the purpose herein to maintain that Hamlet is excluded from every species of action. On the contrary, there is only one kind of action from which he is wholly excluded, though a tendency to procrastination is not infrequently apparent. Just here occurs, perhaps, the greatest difficulty in comprehending Hamlet's character. He is wonderfully ready to do certain things; other things he will not do, and cannot bring himself to do—in fine, he acts, and does not act. Hence different critics have given exactly opposite opinions of him; one class say he possesses no power of

action; another class declare that he possesses a vast energy of Will. How can this contradiction be reconciled? Only by distinguishing the different kinds of action of which men are capable. Undoubtedly Hamlet can do some things, but the great deed he cannot reach. We shall attempt a classification of the different forms of action, and point out what lies in the power of Hamlet.

1. Impulse has sway over Hamlet at times, as over every human being. This is the first and lowest form of action—unconscious, unreflecting—and belongs to the emotional nature of man, in which, as we have before seen, Hamlet is by no means wanting. Under its influence people act upon the spur of the moment, without thinking of consequences. Hence Hamlet's drawback—reflection—is not now present, and there is nothing to restrain him from action. But the instant there is delay sufficient to let his thoughts get a start, then farewell deed; impulse possesses him no longer. This is most strikingly shown when he sees the King at prayer; his first impulse is to slay him, but a reflection steps between, and the accomplishment of his plan is again deferred. Moreover, impulse may lead to immoral action, even to crime, since it acts regardless of content; it cannot inquire of itself, What is the nature of this deed which I am doing? but blindly carries itself into execution. Hamlet, therefore, as a sentient being, is capable of this kind of action; and here is where we must seek the source of all his positive acts. He slays Polonius under the influence of a momentary im-

pulse, and finally, even in the catastrophe, it requires the goading of a sudden passion to bring him to kill the King.

2. Hamlet possesses what may be called negative action—the power of frustrating the designs of his enemies. He exhibits an infinite acuteness in seeing through their plans; in fact, this seems an exercise of intellectual subtlety, in which he takes special delight; he also possesses the practical strength to render futile all the attempts of the King against his person. He is prepared for everything; his confidence in himself, in this direction, is unlimited; he knows that he can “delve one yard below their mines and blow them at the moon.” But here his power of action ends; it has only this negative result—the defeat of the schemes against him. It is undeniable that this requires speedy resolution and quick execution, and, hence, may appear contradictory to what has been before stated; still, it is not inconsistent with the character of Hamlet. For this sort of action, though it is no doubt a deed, ends with negating some other deed, and not with any truly positive act. Moreover, it is a condition of the drama itself that Hamlet possess so much action, at least, as to maintain himself for a while; otherwise, he must fall a victim to the first conspiracy, and the play abruptly terminate. It is only the great substantial deed, which includes all other deeds in its end, that Hamlet cannot perform. This brings us to the next kind of action.

3. It is what we term Rational Action from

which Hamlet is excluded. Here the individual seizes a true and justifiable end, and carries it into execution. This end Intelligence knows as rational, for it alone can recognize the worth and validity of an end, and the Will brings it to realization. Thus we have the highest union of Intelligence and Will, which gives the most exalted form of action. This unity Hamlet cannot reach; he grasps the end, and comprehends it in its fullest significance; but there it remains, caught in its own toils. But what would true action demand? There may be doubts and difficulties in the way, but these are ultimately brushed aside; there may even be moral scruples which rear their front—and this is actually the case with Hamlet—but these, too, must finally be subordinated—the higher to the lower. Thus the rational man acts; having seized the highest end, he casts aside all doubts, reflections, also moral misgivings; for the true morality must be contained in his end, if it be really the highest.

Now, what is this end? Hamlet is invoked to vindicate both the Family and State, together with his own individual rights; it is his father, the King, who is slain; his mother, the Queen, who is debauched; himself who is deprived of a throne. The order of the world is thus turned upside down; he knows that he is born to set it right; that this is the highest duty, to which every inferior duty must yield; he repeatedly makes his resolution in the strongest terms, yet, after all, he allows his purpose to be first clouded and then defeated by his moral feelings and interminable reflections. The object-

ive world of Spirit,—State, Family, Society, Right—which Hamlet, by station and culture, is called upon to maintain as the highest end which man can place before himself—since upon them depend his very existence as a rational being—is lost in the inextricable mazes of subjectivity.

But it is not intended to affirm that the true way of setting the time in order was to kill the King. Revenge may be wrong and conscience right; then Rational Action demands that conscience be followed. But Hamlet will neither renounce nor obey one or the other. His deed is caught in the antithesis of two principles of his character; he will not act from revenge on account of conscience, and he will not act from conscience on account of revenge.

By this distinction between the kinds of deeds it would seem that the striking contradiction in the character of Hamlet—his action and his non-action—can be reconciled. We are to consider what he can perform and what he cannot. Certain kinds of action lie in his power, but the one great act is beyond his ability. In like manner the difference of opinion among critics upon this subject would meet with a satisfactory solution.

Moreover, this distinction will assist us in dispelling a confusion which very often haunts the reader of this drama. When it is said that Hamlet's reflection destroys his action, is it meant that we should never think before we act? Many have taken such to be the poet's meaning, and have even accepted the doctrine that we must go back to

impulse, and cut loose from our intellect; in other words, they declare that instinctive is higher and truer than conscious activity. They do this because they think that nothing remains but to take the lower form of action—impulse. But we have seen above that there is another more exalted kind—Rational Action—which demands thought, for its content can be seized only by thought, and, indeed, that content itself is thought in its objective form. Thus Intelligence passes over into reality—becomes a principle of action. Man now grasps a substantial end by mind, and then carries it into execution. That the poet does not regard impulse as the true basis of action is shown by the fact that he gives it to Hamlet, who, by this very means, is first made a criminal, and then brought to destruction. Hence the lesson is that we are to reflect before acting, but not to stop there.

Rational Action is the great object, and that always includes Intelligence. Having grasped a true end (of course through Intelligence), we should proceed to realize it without thinking on all possible relations and consequences; for subjective reflection looks at the deed, and summons up every imaginable possibility. As these are simply infinite the action is infinitely deferred. Consider, for a moment, what *may* take place, if you merely go to your daily occupation—a team may run over you, a house may fall on you, a stray bullet may hit you—and it will be evident what possibilities lie in the most ordinary act, what excuses a lively fancy can rouse up to shirk the performance of any

duty. Hamlet clearly recognizes this rational end, yet will not translate it into reality, because of "thinking too precisely on the event," to use his own expression.

VI. *The death of Polonius.*—This has given great difficulty, and even offense; its object should be fully comprehended, for it not only illustrates the character of Hamlet, but also is one of the leading motives of the play. No other incident shows so deep a design, or is so appropriate for its purpose. Hamlet, acting blindly through impulse, slays the wrong one; the result is—guilt. This warning, therefore, speaks from the rash act: Let no rational being give up control to impulse which cannot see, cannot distinguish, the nature of a deed. Man must, therefore, reflect before proceeding to action. But, through reflection, Hamlet is unable to do the deed; thus he cannot perform the great injunction laid upon his soul. Such is his dilemma; if he acts, it is through impulse, and he falls into guilt; if he reflects, he cannot act—that is, he cannot do the Great Deed of his life, and so commits, at least, a sin of omission. What will be Hamlet's solution? He tells it himself in the latter part of the play: Throw yourself back into impulse, and abandon control through Intelligence. But what will be the result of such a doctrine? Death—the thinking being who cannot act from thought must perish.

Through the killing of Polonius, Hamlet has committed the very crime which he was seeking to punish; the son of a father murdered has himself

murdered a father. Retribution will call up against him a son, at whose hands he will meet his fate. Hamlet recognizes this fact in full; he beholds in the person of Laertes not only his own cause, but his own deed coming back:

For by the image of my cause, I see
The portraiture of his; I'll court his favors.

So this incident offers the profoundest illustration of Hamlet's character, and, at the same time, furnishes the motive of his death. Polonius may have deserved to die for his offenses, but Hamlet had no right to slay him. Thus Hamlet does himself the primal deed of guilt.

VII. *The Primal Deed.*—A deed has been done, a deed of horror and guilt, the murder of a King; this deed is the Fate which works through the play till the end, and entangles in its serpentine coils all the leading characters. Yet we must regard these characters as free in action, though they manifest weakness and limitation, whereby they become tragic. That wicked deed we may picture to ourselves as an enormous boa constrictor, which winds through the drama, and laps and crushes passing human victims in its sudden sinuosities. Yet these victims, by the very fact of possessing life and reason, have always in themselves the danger of such a monster. This horrible deed is a new Laocoon group, much larger and more intricate than the old one, revealing afresh the double texture, in which Fate is the warp and Freedom the woof, of the garment of life.

The characters of the play range themselves in some relation to this deed. First is the present King, the guilty doer, to whom we may add the Queen, mother of Hamlet, a guilty participant; if not a murderess, at least faithless. The second set is the family of Polonius, father, son, daughter, but no mother; all of them together we may name the conscienceless set, the ever-ready tools of the King. The third and more remote group is that of the courtiers, of whom Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the hypocritical friends of Hamlet, yet slavish instruments of the King, are swept into the fateful net. The fourth is Hamlet, a group of characters almost to himself, the great enemy of the murderous deed and its allotted avenger; still he, too, becomes entangled in it, and perishes along with the guilty doer. Thus the sweep of the deed involves the two opposites, Hamlet and the King, its doer and its avenger, in one common destiny.

This wicked deed has been thrown, as it were, into the Ethical World, which has to purify itself of the same, if this Ethical World continue to exist. The process of such purification is given variously by the poet in his different dramas; here all the chief characters are eliminated from society, or eliminate themselves; there remains as ruler an outsider, Fortinbras of Norway. Mark him well, he belongs most profoundly to the poet's economy; he hovers over the beginning, middle, and end of the play; we see him at the start as the man of action, who is seeking to make his own State whole, to be truly the healer of his country. Such

a function he is to perform for Denmark also; he stands in striking contrast to the Danish Royal House with its internal plottings, crimes, and inactivities. He represents the purification which overarches all this scene of crime and death; he is the catharsis, which is indeed the true tragic outcome—not the negative, but the positive result of tragedy. In *Lear* and in *Macbeth* this process of purification is woven into the inner movement of the play; but here it rather envelops the whole action, from first to last, like the providential order above us.

Another characteristic of this guilty deed in the present drama must never be left out of mind. It is veiled in mystery; it is revealed to Hamlet and to us not by living evidence, but by dead, which yet speaks. No human eye, but the doer's, has seen the deed, still it is made known, must be made known. A voice comes and tells, a secret voice to us, still we know it to be the voice of the moral order of the world, which has been so deeply violated, it tells the truth and commands the expiation. Thus its word profoundly accords with our reason, though its shape transcend our understanding.

In some way, we must feel the necessity of this voice from beyond. The present King has simply murdered his brother, but is that all? No; in that act is involved another act—his death. He does the first, the second is brought about by the world over him, which he has defied. A world supplementing and completing the cycle of the human

deed is our strongest faith and deepest want; in this drama that world has its personal representative, sent from beyond, and speaking "with most miraculous organ."

VIII. *The Ghost's Act*.—The First Act is poetically the best Act of the play, and gives the motives which unfold into the whole work. It is, moreover, the Ghost's Act, and contains the grand revelation as well as the grand mystery. In it the Supernatural and Natural Worlds are brought together, the one impinging upon and driving the other. The Ghost starts the play, as the Weird Sisters start *Macbeth*. We shall, accordingly, take a survey of this Act, scene by scene, and seek to penetrate its economy.

In the First Scene we find that the Ghost had already appeared twice to the soldiers on guard at the castle, when the matter is investigated by Horatio, a scholar, who did not believe in ghosts. He sees it also, sees it twice, and has to confess that his disbelief is confuted. He addresses it, asks it to speak, but it vanishes at any attempt to hold communication with itself. Horatio, though in particular non-plused, has in general a theory of the appearance: "This bodessome strange eruption to our State;" and the eruption is connected with young Fortinbras, not without significance. Horatio, being a learned man from the University, cites a classic instance of ghosts, "a little ere the mightiest Julius fell;" so this Ghost indicates "the like precurse of fierce events." To his mind it is a political omen, unfavorable also, which is to be

told to young Hamlet, to whom it may possibly speak. The great fact of this scene is that the Ghost must be taken as objective; it is seen twice by two soldiers at least, before Horatio sees it, and he sees it twice in the presence of two soldiers, who also see it along with him. There is no explaining the Ghost away as a subjective phantasm.

In the Second Scene we pass, as it were, from the Supernatural into the Natural World, yet the first line, which tells of "our dear brother's death," connects with the Ghost. The new King reveals his outer grief and his inner joy, and so he declares

That we with wisest sorrow think on him
Together with remembrance of ourselves.

Observe, too, how this King meets Fortinbras, not with arms as the elder Hamlet did, but with diplomacy; to which procedure we cannot object, though in it we must read the sign. Then he permits Laertes to return to Paris, but will not suffer Hamlet to return to Wittenberg, wherein again there is no little significance. Wittenberg and Paris are two tendencies of the soul, two tendencies of that age, and of this age. Here is one of Shakespeare's passing glimpses, still it is but a glimpse, so we must not delay too long upon it. But the main fact of this scene is the appearance of Hamlet. His very first words reflect the commingled light and darkness of the character:

A little more than kin and less than kind.

We stop to think to ourselves, what does he mean?

We see a sense, yet the sense darts behind a cloud. We catch the sarcasm, and yet there is something which we do not catch. Many explanations are given, still there remains the inexplicable. Let us hear his second speech:

King. How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

Hamlet. Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun.

Again we stop and wonder; meaning is here, but there is also mystery; indeed that must be Hamlet, a mingling of meaning and mystery. He quite defines himself in his next response.

Seems, madman! nay, it is; I know not "seems."

There is an outer side which "a man might play," and later on Hamlet will play it, nay, just now he is playing it, and cannot help himself; still he can also truly say:

But I have that within which passeth show.

And he has it even here, it is his mystery. Hamlet finds himself in a world from which he would gladly escape by suicide—a world made by the wicked deed, whose environment is crushing him, though he is not yet fully conscious of it; but it oppresses him, and hence comes his melancholy. In his soliloquy he dwells upon two things; first, the hasty marriage of his mother; second, her marriage with such a man as Claudius, who, we see, is the real center of his suspicion, being so emphatically contrasted with his father.

Next, we notice that Hamlet is internally ready

to see the Ghost, wherein the poet's art may well be thought upon:

Hamlet. My father! methinks I see my father.

Horatio. O where, my lord?

Hamlet. In my mind's eye, Horatio.

Horatio. I saw him once; he was a goodly King.

Hamlet. He was a man, take him for all in all

I shall not look upon his like again.

Horatio. My lord, I think I saw him yesternight.

Hamlet. Saw! who?

Horatio. My lord, the King your father.

Hamlet. The King my father!

Whereupon the whole story of the apparition is told. Hamlet may well be surprised that his inner vision so suddenly changes to an outer reality. "I see my father in my mind's eye;" the image within and the specter without are directly connected. In the First Scene we noted how careful the poet was to make the Ghost objective; in the present scene he is careful to make it subjective also; it exists both in the man and in the world. Further on, Hamlet gives his interpretation of the appearance: "all is not well;" moreover he fears "some foul play," wherein his suspicion crops out; then he declares his emphatic faith that

Fouls deeds will rise,

Though all the earth overwhelm them to men's eyes.

This spirit means to him some foul deed, and such it is; when it gets a voice, it will tell that deed. It cannot speak to Horatio, he has not the inner preparation; Hamlet alone is the man to hear it. The mutual attitude of the King and Hamlet is now settled, and will continue to unfold into many forms through the play; each is concealing what

the other is trying to find out, and each strongly suspects the other in that concealment.

The Third Scene introduces another phase of this decaying life in Denmark, which supplements what we have just beheld in the highest functionaries of the State, the King and the Queen. It is the family of Polonius, father, son, daughter — pliant instruments of the monarch, who are to be included in the sweep of the grand revenge. Here they deny truth and morality to Hamlet, because they have none themselves, in the high sense of conscience. But the main fact of the scene for us at present is, that Hamlet's love is also destroyed in this Danish atmosphere. He has wooed the daughter Ophelia, but father and son brand his love as lust, and bid her break the bond, which she does. She apparently believes them, but such a belief is crushing to her; when a woman comes to think that love is lust, her life is already unbalanced, and if she reach the unrestraint of lunacy, she will sing the songs of Ophelia. In this scene her father and brother laid in her the tragic germ which time will develop. But Hamlet is now alone, indeed; his own mother is corrupted and lost to him; even the more tender relation is stained, broken and cast away. It is no wonder that to him Denmark is a prison and one of the worst, and he may well say: "Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither;" for he has as tough experience with women as with men.

In the Fourth Scene, while the company is waiting for the Ghost, the noise of revel comes from

the King's palace, and stirs Hamlet to a curious tissue of reflections, which shows another trait in his character, the reflective:

So oft it chances in particular men,
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As, in their birth—wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
By the overgrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason, etc.

Here we see Hamlet caught in an infinite series of reflections, from which he is unable to extricate himself. Nor can he rescue his sentence and bring it to an end, though he repeatedly resolves to do so; the very grammar of it becomes a picture of Hamlet's mind. Moreover he is really portraying himself; "that vicious mole" is his own, not only described but shown in the structure of the passage, which also has a "mole" in it. Critics complain of its style, but Shakespeare is not thinking of style, but character. The last sentence turns to haze:

The dram of eale
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal.

What does this mean? Commentators cry corruption, and try to mend the passage; but it has meaning in its very uncertainty. Hamlet seems unable to close his sentence, caught in that treadmill of eternally self-begetting reflection; language itself grows dim and indefinite, begins to be shadowy, ghostly, when lo! the Ghost in person appears and forces the sentence to a sudden end. Here the intellectual tendency of Hamlet is indi-

cated; his thought gets lost in its own intricacies, and his speech wanders off into an unreal, dubious realm, whither we cannot follow. The transition from Hamlet's mind to that specter is, we think, cunningly prepared; the reflective man lapses into the Ghost-seer. But the Ghost will not speak to him in the presence of others, though it shows itself to them all; manifestly Hamlet alone is ready for its utterance. Only the inner and outer specter can communicate. The connection between his imagination and the Ghost is made by Hamlet himself:

If his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
It is a damned Ghost that we have seen,
And my imaginations are as foul
As Vulcan's stithy.

In the Fifth Scene it speaks and tells the story of the father's murder and the mother's infidelity. It is an unhappy Ghost, evidently in process of discipline, being "doomed for a certain term to walk the night," for the good spirit returns not as a specter; also being "confined to fast in fires" during the day, on account of "the foul crimes done in my days of nature." Hamlet, in spite of admiration of his father, thinks "'tis heavy with him" in that future state, and the reader must think so too.

For listen to its injunction—revenge. Such is the essence of the Ghost—revenge. A command is laid upon the son which makes him a murderer, the murderer of his uncle, just as the latter was guilty of a brother's murder. It seeks to make the son what the uncle is. Thrice it utters the bode-

ful command; further on we shall hear it speak a second time that word—revenge. No wonder the Ghost is yet to burn for its sins; it is really in its own Hell-fire, those “sulphurous and tormenting flames” kindled by itself in that one word—revenge. Moreover it flings the son living into the same flames, though the son doubts, hesitates, resists to the last.

It is this command of revenge which whelms Hamlet into his most bitter conflict, that with his conscience. The guilty King, Claudius, ought to be punished, yet there is no institution to which he is accountable, and his punishment falls to the lot of some person. This person is the next of kin, according to ancient Teutonic usage; Hamlet is thus the appointed avenger. But he is the moral man, to him the slaying of his uncle is murder. He is the child of the Reformation with its moral conscience; yet his political conscience, or at least that of his age, still cries out for revenge. He is placed in an epoch of transition; the old and the new order clash in him, and make him tragic. The political problem of Hamlet is solved by making the Supreme Ruler of the State responsible for his action—a solution which time has wrought out in government, especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. But in the present drama, the duty of revenge has still an institutional sanction, as it were, and thus collides with another duty, that of not revenging.

The origin of the Ghost is not given, it remains the mystery to Hamlet and to us. Hamlet is the Ghost-seer, and specially the Ghost-hearer; yet

we may not affirm that the Ghost has no reality whatever. Hamlet is in a condition to see it and to hear it, as Homer's heroes must be in a condition to see and to hear the Gods, before the Gods can show themselves. Hamlet does not make the fact announced, he does not make even the form; he can see and hear it, this is just his nature. The inner Hamlet and the outer Ghost meet and converse.

We must think, too, that this ghostly form is the appropriate one for the communication, being the form for a voice of the spirit disembodied: "I am thy father's spirit." When the dead man speaks, it cannot be his body, but the bodiless form which is called his ghost. Though the form be unreal, it states the fact, it is the voice of the deed, it is the murdered man himself returning to tell his story, not as a material but a spiritual entity. The very air, imprinted with the Deed, takes his shape and speaks his voice. The world-order being violated cries out, must cry out in some way, that it may be purged of that wicked act.

Such is the faith of men, a faith often alluded to by Shakespeare. The spiritual universe has some method of voicing the unseen crime, of pointing out "the secretest man of blood." This faith is expressed in a mythical form in the Ghost, now voicing the ethical order, which cannot exist with the guilty deed lurking in its bosom. Such a faith we all have in some form, perhaps not in the ghostly. But even this belief in ghosts has its truth; it is man's assertion of the soul's persistence

after death, it is the people's conception of immortality, the race's faith that the person endures. In this respect, too, the Ghost is but an image of Hamlet's inner state and belief:

I do not set my life at a pin's fee,
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?

But after all is told, there remains an unknown factor of mystery in the Ghost? Is there actually such a form? Does the spirit return and speak? So the Mythus holds, from Homer down; but the Mythus is not yet science in this case. Our age demands that the appearance be subjected to the laws of the Understanding, and such subjection of the Ghost has not yet taken place. Science may yet demonstrate the law of such appearances, it may yet be able to call them forth, but then the Ghost will be no Ghost. It still belongs to the Supernatural World, along with the Weird Sisters, from whom, however, it is quite distinct. But like the Weird Sister, the poet makes it, in the first place, objective, visible to others besides Hamlet; truly it exists in the world. Secondly, it is subjective also, it is in Hamlet, and he alone hears its voice. Thirdly, this voice takes the form of the Ghost for utterance, being the voice of the murdered man telling the unwitnessed deed of guilt. Fourthly, this form of the Ghost was furnished to the poet by the faith of his race, which declares even under this mythical garb, its belief in immortality, and its belief in an ethical order of the

world which brings to light and punishes the hidden crime. So Hamlet, too, believes:

For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ.

These two beliefs, implied by the Ghost, are, accordingly, the expressed beliefs of Hamlet. He has already spoken of the soul as immortal, and he further declares, in substance, that murder will out. We see how careful the poet has been to show the correspondences between the internal Hamlet and the external Ghost; the one says what the other says, though in a different manner. We must follow Shakespeare in preserving the complete validity of both sides; this is his art, his truth. We must not permit the Ghost to vanish into a mere internal condition of Hamlet, nor, on the other hand, must we consider it as a purely external phantasm, wholly outside of him, gotten up for spectacular effect, and catering to the superstition of the age of the poet.

IX. *Structural Lines of Hamlet's Character.*—

The character of Hamlet takes a wide range and embraces the most contradictory traits, those of rationality and irrationality, as well as those of activity and inactivity, all of which have been previously discussed. To obtain a complete survey of this character is almost like going through a whole science of mind; the drama is a psychology. We discern from the very first an outward and an inward Hamlet; in fact he makes such a distinction himself quite at the start, when he says that he knows not "seems," but has "that within which

passeth show." We must consider this external side, though with him it be the less important.

1. The outward Hamlet is as he appears in the world, his address, his courtly manners; he is "the glass of fashion and the mould of form," he has all the externals of his princely estate, which are so extolled by Ophelia, and which we notice in his reception of the players and elsewhere. Then comes his ready wit and passing jest, capable of turning to bitter satire; he has sportfulness, even waggishness, he delights in playing hide-and-go-seek with others, and even with himself. He sports with both word and thought, hence his verbal and mental puns, which the reader cannot always catch; he loves to mystify his fellow-speakers, even to play with mystery itself. Such is the surface of his conduct, on which, as he floats along, he is perpetually diving out of sight and coming up again. We see sportive ripples, but they often break into hot tears; then we behold the inner Hamlet with intense soul-struggles hidden under an outward demeanor, which, after all, casts a shadow of what is going on inside. This play, this disguise which he seems so fond of, we find to be a relief from the internal tragedy of his life, as well as a concealment. Herein he recalls that American President who found in humorous anecdote and story a refuge from the civil war of his own heart, as well as from the civil war of his country.

2. Of this inner Hamlet we observe four phases in deepening order; we may call them the four Hamlets.

1st. There is the instinctive, impulsive Hamlet, a man of presentiment, of oppressive melancholy, of boding instinct, who feels the guilty deed before it is told him, a dweller in the dark unconscious realm of emotion and passion; he is the man who acts through impulse, and thereby slays Polonius, and at last the King. This is quite opposite to the reflective side of his nature.

2nd. Hamlet as Ghost-seer, or rather as Ghost-hearer, in whom the unconscious presentiment rises to an image, with a voice which utters the Deed, and lays upon him the hard command of revenge. An imaginative man he is now, who can see his father both "in his mind's eye," and as Ghost.

3rd. The moral Hamlet, the man with an inner law, conscience, which commands against the command of the Ghost, forbids revenge, forbids both murder and suicide. Yet the duty to avenge his father's blood remains too; fiercely the conflict rages within, but conscience overawes him, and he has to confess:

Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all.

4th. The intellectual Hamlet, the man in whom thought undermines action, who has in his soul that deepest of all chasms—Intellect divorcing itself from Will. As a reflective man he must know himself, and so he describes this tendency in himself:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn away,
And lose the name of action.

Thus the conscience-conflict and the thought-conflict are placed beside each other in the soliloquy on suicide, as they are also in the soliloquy on Fortinbras, where the one is hinted as a "craven scruple," and the other spoken of as "large discourse looking before and after," and as "godlike reason," which is not given "to fust in us unused," that is, without being realized in action.

So we behold the four Hamlets, the instinctive, imaginative, moral, intellectual—yet one Hamlet. He conflicts with himself, since he is so many Hamlets, and cannot subordinate them all. He talks with himself in apparent soliloquy, yet it is one Hamlet talking with another Hamlet. His drama is essentially an inner or soul-drama, of which the main characters are himself.

X. *Lines of Hamlet Criticism.*—The lines of Hamlet criticism follow quite on the lines which we have just seen to be those of Hamlet's character. Some phase of it makes a strong impression upon the critic, who then proceeds to look at the whole man from the one trait. The Hamlet literature, hardly more than a century old, is getting to have a history like that of a national literature. It has its fashions, its excesses; all sorts of topics are drawn into it from every side. Some centuries hence, the history of the opinions on *Hamlet*, with all their fluctuations, will make a most curious chapter in the book of the Human Intellect. Even at present, it is a great psychological discipline to study how this play has affected different minds and different periods. Mr. Furness has given

much material for such a study in that magnificent monument to the poet and to himself, the *Variorum Hamlet*, to which we owe many obligations.

The views of Hamlet's character have moved in three main lines. The first view is that of Goethe, who felt strongly Hamlet's paralysis of will, and accounts for it by saying that "Shakespeare sought to depict a great deed laid upon a soul unequal to the performance of it. * * * Here is an oak tree planted in a costly vase, which should have received into its bosom only lovely flowers; the roots spread out, the vase is shattered to pieces. * * * A beautiful, pure, noble, moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off." That is, Goethe sees the moral conflict, and seems to think that this is the sole essential matter. But it is not all, and his opinion, in consequence, must be supplemented by that of Schlegel, who strongly marks the thought-conflict in Hamlet, calling the play "a Tragedy of Thought." Schlegel further declares: "The Whole is intended to show that a consideration, which would exhaust all the relations and possible consequences of a deed to the very limits of human foresight, cripples the power of acting." This is the second line of opinion, which was also maintained, substantially, by Coleridge, quite as soon as it was by Schlegel.

Both these opinions seek to account for Hamlet's want of action. Goethe sees it as the result of the moral conflict (*Revenge vs. Conscience*;) but

Schlegel sees it as the result of the psychological conflict (*Will vs. Thought*.) Both opinions are right, if they are not made exclusive; both conflicts, as we have seen, are in Hamlet. But not only inactivity he shows; he has also activity; hence there arises a third line of opinion which lays stress upon Hamlet's power of will.

This trait has, perhaps, been most strongly set forth by Ulrici, who claims to have been the first to vindicate Hamlet's ability to act, though before him Herder had pointedly said that Hamlet was not wanting in will. This view is also correct, if it be not made exclusive; Hamlet is certainly capable of action, especially the impulsive Hamlet, and the counterplotting Hamlet. Thus all three views are right, and indicate valid traits; but all three may become wrong by making too great claims.

On these three lines, mainly, Hamlet criticism has run, with indefinite repetition; it is destined, probably, to move in these grooves, to a greater or less extent. Brilliant attempts, like that of Werder, have been made to throw it into other directions, but with doubtful success; they are but little eddies in the great stream. A synthesis of all the fundamental traits which analysis has found in the character of Hamlet, is a task which criticism has yet to perform.

XI. *Historic Features in the Drama*.—Hamlet we may conceive of as a man about thirty years of age, who has spent some time at the University of Wittenberg. It is to be observed that this is a German University and the home of the Reforma-

tion—hints which the poet has not given without a far-reaching purpose. For it is indicated that the culture of Hamlet is German, in contrast to the French culture of Laertes, who goes to Paris, which is not known as the home of any reformation, particularly not of a moral one. Also, the German is now and always has been, speculative rather than practical, and, for this reason, he is today the teacher of the world in thought and philosophy. In Germany, too, began that rebellion against the external forms of the Church, in favor of subjective freedom, which rebellion was nourished in this very Wittenberg. In contrast to Paris it laid stress upon the internal and spiritual nature of man rather than upon the outward show and conventionalities of life. So, by a happy stroke, the poet has identified Hamlet with the great historical movement of modern times—a movement which sought to free the human mind from an excessive servitude to external forms, and to bring it to a profounder self-consciousness. Hamlet is true to his education in the highest degree; he represents an historic epoch, whose inner struggles he has taken into his own bosom.

Thus both the Teutonic and Romanic worlds are woven into the play, yet everywhere with the tinge of the Renaissance. The names of the characters form a curious study. There are the Italian or Italianized names—Horatio, Bernardo, Francisco, Reynaldo, the last three being Italianized from the old Teutonic; one sometimes wonders at these Italian soldiers keeping guard in Denmark.

Then come the Latin and Latinized names—Claudius, Cornelius, Marcellus are the veriest old Romans, while Polonius seems a Latinized modern of the Renaissance. But his children have Greek names—Laertes and Ophelia—as if the Hellenizing influence must be represented too. Then the genuine Teutonic names—Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, with one in French or Norman-French, Fortinbras. Hamlet's name, is, doubtless, Teutonic, but like the man himself, somewhat veiled in mystery. These Greek, Latin and Italian names must have been added by the poet (or, possibly, in part by some dramatic predecessor,) as the legend employs Teutonic names.

We are not to seek any etymological allegory under the cover of these names; we are not to hunt in their meanings an interpretation of the play. The signification of the word Ophelia or Gertrude will not reveal the character of the women so called. But there is a meaning in this commingling of the names belonging to Northern and Southern Europe; we may see in it faintly the great revival and intellectual intercourse of nations after the Middle Ages; we may catch in it a tinge of the Italian Renaissance going back to Greece and Rome for its humane studies and imparting them to the rest of Europe, especially to the Teutonic portion; we may feel in it, perchance, a slight throb of the German Reformation, reaching through these humane studies of the South after the inner light, that of the soul and conscience. The mere names, however, cannot bring us very far; they are

but the faintest, fleetest shadows, which are to be filled with the flesh and blood and breath of life from another source.

Nor are we to consider this drama as an historical allegory, putting under a veiled form events and persons of Elizabethan history. Doubtless Shakespeare was profoundly influenced by the great actions and important individuals of his time; he must have often thought of both in writing his plays. Still we cannot be satisfied to think, in spite of the striking similarities, that Gertrude is Mary Queen of Scots, that the murdered King is her former husband Lord Darnley, that the present King, Claudius, is the murderer Bothwell, whose "o'er hasty marriage" with Queen Mary occurred three months after the death of Darnley, that Hamlet is her son King James. Still less successful seems the attempt to consider Hamlet as Sir Philip Sidney, and from this standpoint to re-construct the play out of the members of Queen Elizabeth's court. (See Furness, *Variorum Hamlet*, Vol II. p 236-40). Shakespeare's dramas are not allegories; they exist in their own right, and do not put one particular person or thing for another. They have meaning, the profoundest, but this meaning lies in them, not outside of them in something else. Shakespeare's son was called Hamnet, who died under twelve years of age, possibly during some phase of the composition of this drama; at any rate the father must often have thought of his dead boy in writing or speaking the name of Hamlet. But

who can trace the influence of this personal experience in the play?

XII. *History of the Hamlet Legend.*—Saxo Grammaticus, who, toward the end of the twelfth century, wrote a Danish History, is the primitive source of the legend of Hamlet, as far as it has yet been traced. But it probably obtained European currency through Belleforest's collection of "Tragic Stories," in a volume printed in French at Paris in 1570, from which, doubtless, it passed to England. Finally an English book called the "Hystorie of Hamblet," bearing the date of 1608, tells the story of the Danish Prince, and emphatically suggests the work of Shakespeare. These are the three books in which the mythical form of the legend had been preserved for more than four centuries.

In the shape in which these three books give it, we observe it to be a grim Teutonic legend springing out of a distant heathen age, which rests upon the rudest form of justice, namely, personal revenge. The King (or Governor,) is murdered by his brother, who has corrupted his wife, and then usurps his throne. There is a son of the murdered King, who counterfeits madness, yet is suspected and watched by courtiers set upon his track, till he slays one, as Hamlet does Polonius. Then he is sent to England, whence he returns, wreaks his revenge upon his uncle, and is himself made King. The old legend, however, does not stop here, but repeats the deeds of blood and infidelity; for Hamlet, after his return and coronation, is assailed by

another uncle, Wiglerus, and being betrayed by his wife Hermetrude, is slain; after his death she marries his uncle and murderer, Wiglerus. Thus the legend ends quite as it began, with the murder of kindred and the faithlessness of the wife; revenge follows murder and murder follows revenge, and there is no solution of the difficulty.

Now upon this ancient Teutonic revenge the poet is going to engraft a new spirit, which hesitates to do the vengeful deed. Hamlet is deeply dissatisfied with that world of murder and revenge into which he has been born, hence his melancholy, his reaction against it. There is no Ghost in the old legend with its message from beyond; there needs no Ghost to command vengeance, it is already active. Nor is Hamlet turned back by accident ere he reaches England; just as little does he suffer the penalty for slaying the old courtier behind the arras. But a new world has arisen; upon the old Teuton with his hot revenge and quick action are superposed conscience and thought—a Christian, we might say, a Protestant questioning and introspection. The inner law of duty and the outer law of retaliation collide in him, and he cannot master their collision; he becomes tragic, and falls between “the fell and incensed points of mighty opposites;” for we must observe that, if he refuses to follow revenge, just as much does he refuse to follow conscience.

The man who simulates insanity with cunning purpose is a veritable possession of the race; he is found East and West, in Semitic scripture, and in

Celtic legend; especially he has become a world-character through Roman Brutus, with whom old Saxo Grammaticus already compares Hamlet. Shakespeare thus seized a type which had become fixed in the imaginations of men, and was as old as Literature. But to this ancient type, which is general, he gives new life, which endows it with a fresh and vivid individuality. If Hamlet, however, be actually insane, the poet has been anticipated by legend in this field also, especially in the case of Greek Orestes.

The first great Teutonic poem is *Hamlet*, revealing distinctively the Northern spirit, as well as moving in a Northern environment. The second great Teutonic poem is Goethe's *Faust*, which has a deep kinship with *Hamlet*. Each touches a problem of thought; in the case of the Danish Prince thought has a tendency to blast action, while the companion of Mephisto reveals the destructive side of thought, which in its negative, skeptical outcome begets the Devil. Hamlet's fiend is passive rather, a paralysis; Faust's fiend is decidedly active, a propulsion. Both poems reach down to a heathen foundation, upon which a new order is built; both go back to a Teutonic afore-time, which is impinging upon an era of change; both belong essentially to the Reformation, and both, to attain their highest development, rise out of a legendary into a dramatic form. The Hamlet legend is next to nothing, till, by the touch of the poet, it becomes the Hamlet drama.

XIII. *History of the Hamlet Drama.*—The

Hamlet legend, accordingly, cannot be said to have impressed itself deeply upon the Teutonic consciousness, till it took the shape of the Hamlet drama. This transition indicates not merely a great change of form, but a greater change of meaning; the old legend with its passion and revenge, being filled with conscience and thought, becomes the new drama. The same change essentially takes place in England at the same time, and to a degree in Northern Europe; conscience and thought, with their strange prohibitions and deep probings, at first palsy the hand and "puzzle the will" of the people in whose soul they begin to work. Such a soul in its struggling from one side to the other, not the legend, but the drama will present in Hamlet, though the legend often shows the dramatic kernel sprouting within.

The first allusion in English Literature to a Hamlet drama is found in an Epistle by Thomas Nash prefixed to Greene's *Menaphon*, a book bearing the date of 1589, when Shakespeare was twenty-five years old, and when he had been in London about four years. Was this earliest Hamlet drama the production of Shakespeare? The best judges divide upon the question, but it seems probable that he may then have first put his hand to *Hamlet*. Other allusions have been discovered, extending to the year 1603, which is the date of the First Quarto, with Shakespeare's name upon its title page. Next year (1604) the Second Quarto appeared, with numerous additions, "enlarged to almost as much again as it was, according to the true

and perfect copy," as the statement runs upon its title page.

This is not the place to discuss the many conjectures which have been spun around these two Quartos. Both have the same vignette; the same initials of the name of the publisher appear in both. But the Second Quarto claims to be printed after "the true and perfect copy," a claim which the First Quarto does not make, and which seems to account for the difference in size and character between the two. A careful study and comparison of each with the other is one of the best introductions into the workshop of the poet. The First Quarto is less mature, yet more dramatic externally; it has the action, but not the deepened characterization, especially in the part of Hamlet. The conscience-conflict of the Danish Prince it recognizes, though not so fully as the Second Quarto; but the thought-conflict it leaves out almost wholly. It knows the line:

Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all.

But it has not the lines which follow:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.

Other omissions of the same kind can be traced in it throughout. The transition from the First to the Second Quarto is from a dramatic to an epical fullness, which fits the work better for reading than for acting. The poet, by giving into the hands of the publisher a "true and perfect copy" seems to have recognized another public than that

of the play-house, namely, the vast army of readers who are still the chief public of this drama. And Shakespeare's reading public appears to have responded nobly, as in the next few years no less than three new editions were issued. A still different text is that of the Folio of 1623, inasmuch as it bears a relation both to the First and Second Quartos.

If then the Hamlet drama of 1589 belonged wholly or in part to Shakespeare, he was at least fifteen years in bringing the work to its present perfection. One thinks that the poet must have been always filling in and transforming his plays; they grew, they developed gradually; doubtless they were written largely from the green-room, with the poet's eye both upon his theme and his audience. His best plays, in fact, were written by the English people quite as much as by himself. His audience demanded not so much a new subject as an old subject treated in a new way; an old play wrought over and furnished with fresh and deeper motives seems to have been preferred. In like manner the Greek dramatists took the old legend and gave it a new turn; so we have still remaining to us the three plays of Electra and Orestes by the three Greek tragic poets.

Shakespeare, then, did not write Hamlet at one gush; rather, he wrote his life into it, from manhood to middle-age. So the Danish Prince may well seem both young and old; he is both. The composition of *Hamlet* has its parallel in the composition of *Faust*, which extends over quite sixty

years of Goethe's life. Like *Faust*, too, it bursts the limits of the old theater, and rises to a new dramatic art; the action has to show a paralysis of action, which is not so much for the stage as for our private study. The First Quarto with its 2143 lines is the acting play, which, in the Second Quarto with its 3719 lines, is expanded beyond the bounds of the scenic drama into a great epical drama.

XIV. *Structure of the Hamlet Drama.*—The ethical element in which the drama moves is the Family, of which there has been a double violation—against both father and mother. Thus the son rises up for revenge, which, however, demands the murder of the uncle—a deed which the son refuses to perform, through moral scruples and intellectual hesitation. But, acting through impulse, he slays a father, and thereby becomes guilty of the very crime against the Family which he is seeking to punish. Thus he calls up against himself another son, who applies to him the logic of his own deed. Also, the State is always standing in the background as a minor factor of the collision. Hamlet's father was King, and Hamlet believed himself to have been wrongfully deprived of the throne. Some maintain that Claudius was not a usurper, as Denmark was an elective monarchy; such could hardly have been Hamlet's view of the succession, and probably it was not the poet's. The political violation is repeatedly dwelt upon, though it is by no means so strongly emphasized as the domestic violation. Thus Family and State

are both present; but these ethical elements become almost latent in the overwhelming prominence given to the psychological elements.

Let us now grasp fully the organization of the play. There are two main movements, of which the first portrays the conflict between Hamlet and the King; each is seeking to find out the plans of his opponent, and, when they are found out; to destroy him. At the same time, each has an internal conflict with himself—Hamlet with his will and conscience; the King with his conscience. Both are foiled doubly. In the external conflict neither gets rid of the other—Hamlet does not slay the King, nor does the King succeed in sending Hamlet to England; in the internal conflict neither can heal the breach of own soul—Hamlet will not act, the King will not repent. Here then is the turning-point of the tragedy, the grand refusal of both Hamlet and the King to transform their lives, and to put them into harmony with the ethical order of the world. The First Movement, in general, shows guilt—the King has murdered the old Hamlet, and the young Hamlet murders Polonius, while others are getting involved in the guilty deed.

The Second Movement portrays the final retribution, along with the great changes in the minds and in the circumstances of the various persons. Ophelia goes mad; Hamlet, not acting, comes to believe in fate, and surrenders himself to the guidance of external accident; the King, not repenting, is hardened by transgression, and

plunges readily into a new crime. Still, the external conflict between Hamlet and the King continues after Hamlet's return from his short voyage; the King has now, as his chief instrument, Laertes, who, undertaking to avenge the murder of a father, suffers himself to be perverted into the instrument of the murderer of a father. All these perish by the logic of their deeds, together with the Queen, who, not repenting but continuing to share in her husband's perverse life, shares in his death.

Thus we behold the guilty deed in two mighty sweeps, enveloping, then destroying a whole court, a little world. The culmination is the refusal to repent, to change the wicked conduct of life; the guilty ones are driven to strong self-reproach, even to remorse, but they relapse into the old way when this remorse (really their good angel) passes on. Then they rapidly descend to their tragic fate, for they have refused the saving offer; they cannot be mediated. Conscience makes a last appeal, when its voice seems to grow silent. The question of conscience is thus the culminating point of the action.

The present division into Acts is inept, and does not proceed from Shakespeare, but from a later hand. The Third Act should end with Scene Fourth, Act Fourth, where the soliloquy of Hamlet upon Fortinbras is given. Thus the First Movement would occupy three Acts, and the Second Movement two Acts. In this structural point the tragedy would then quite correspond with *Lear*

and *Macbeth*, its mighty brothers. All three are alike in another point of construction: the First Movement is full, rapid, intense, while the Second Movement is less completely developed, and shows a falling-off in spirit and style somewhat. The poet employs his power in unfolding his characters out of their germinal principle; when they are unfolded he seems to have less interest in carrying them out to the conclusion, which already lies in their conduct. Hence the sudden leaps and omissions in the last two Acts of all these plays, as compared with the first three. Indeed, we may note the same fact in some of Shakespeare's historical dramas.

Besides these Movements, there are two Threads running through the whole play; these we shall call the Hamlet-Thread and the King's Thread, as Hamlet and the King are the central forces, around which the other characters group themselves, and which make the collision. A short abstract of each Thread in each Movement will be given in order to reveal the joints of the dramatic organism.

The First Thread of the First Movement is that of Hamlet, and it has two phases, the external and the internal. On the one hand, it exhibits the influences which come upon him from without, one set of which drives him to do the deed, the other set of which conflicts with him in his purpose; on the other hand, it exhibits the counteraction of these influences through his moral and intellectual hesitation. Thus the blood is taken out of all external forces, and the deed becomes, as it were,

a ghost; transmuted through his peculiar mental medium, the objective world turns to an unreality. Still, he believes that intelligence can control human action, and hopes for this result in his own case. His sole instrument is his friend, Horatio; but there must also be grouped around him those influences which work upon him externally—as the Ghost, together with the soldiers who see it, the players, Fortinbras and the Captain, the grave-diggers. These are the groups of the Hamlet Thread.

The Second Thread of the First Movement is that of the King surrounded by his instruments. He, too, has a double conflict—an external one with Hamlet, and an internal one with himself. His first object is to discover Hamlet's secret, and then to get rid of him when found to be dangerous. His instruments may be classed in three groups. The first is for the general purpose of State, they have little or nothing to do with Hamlet, as Voltimand and Cornelius; the second is composed of courtiers—the servile tools of the monarch—as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to whom Osrick may be added; the third is the family of Polonius—father, son, and daughter—most intimately bound up in the destiny of the House of Denmark—all of whom are used as instruments by the King against Hamlet, and are ground to death in the conflict. The King, therefore, sets influences to work, while Hamlet lets influences come upon him; Hamlet possesses action to the extent of nullifying these influences, but he cannot do the great positive deed.

The First Thread of the Second Movement continues the development of Hamlet. He had been sent off to England to be murdered, when, by accident, he is once more brought back to Denmark. The conflict with the King is opened anew, but under wholly different circumstances. Hamlet no longer has faith in intelligence as the controlling power in the world; it is chance; it is destiny. Thus he throws himself into the arms of fate; previously he believed in action, though not acting; now he does not even believe in action. The man who would not do the deed has come to deny the very possibility of the deed as the product of rational foresight. This psychological change is the most important feature of Hamlet's characterization, and constitutes the essential difference between the First and Second Movements. But, when he thinks for a moment of proceeding to action, there stands Laertes opposed to him—the real embodiment of his own destiny—for Laertes must slay him if he slay the King; both have the same ground of revenge. At this appearance his arms fall palsied by his side, and he quietly lets himself be caught in a plot which he knew of, or strongly suspected.

The Second Thread of the Second Movement is that of the King, whose chief instrument against Hamlet is now Laertes. The death of the parent, Polonius, furnishes a strong motive to the son, which is further intensified by the condition of his sister, Ophelia, whose madness and death are here given. But Laertes ruins his cause by allowing

himself to be made an instrument of the diabolical plans of the King—that King who is himself the murderer of a father, and who is now seeking to destroy the son. Thus Laertes is whirled into the tragic circle of retribution, and becomes the author of his own fate. He aids the destroyer of the parent to destroy the avenger of the parent, which avenger is, logically himself. He thus assails his own principle, and, as it were, passes the sentence of death upon himself.

The method of the following developement will be a little different from the usual manner. The two Threads—that of Hamlet and that of the King will be carried separately through the two Movements; thus a survey of the total development of each side is given without interruption. But the reader has the means of following the action by Movements instead of Threads, if he so chooses, as all these divisions of the play are carefully designated at the proper places.

CHAPTER SECOND.

THE HAMLET THREAD

Our task is now to unfold the part of Hamlet through the whole play, and note its intricacies of thought and structure, as they wind through the action. Two sets of circumstances are brought to bear upon Hamlet, who reacts against both, and thus shows two phases of reaction against his environment.

The first set of circumstances is what we may call the Incalculable, they are what happens without purpose or foreknowledge—the realm of accident. In the First Movement four such occurrences come upon Hamlet: the conduct of his mother, the Ghost, the actors, and Fortinbras. These spring from that great reservoir of Chance, drops from which fall every day upon the individual, or peradventure a stream, which he has to swallow, else it will swallow him. Still, in this Chance, there is a plan, we note; these four occurrences are directed upon Hamlet to drive him forward to the deed, and

they increase in power till the culmination. Hamlet himself sees and states the fact of them:

How all occasions do inform against me
And spur my dull revenge!

These so-called occasions, then, are the spur to action; but against them he reacts inwardly, and the deed collapses in his internal struggles. He has enough conscience to paralyze revenge, and enough revenge to paralyze conscience.

The second set of influences which come upon Hamlet, and interweave with the first set, spring from the Court—the King and his instruments, who are trying to discover the secret of Hamlet, and find the task as difficult as the reader of the play does. They are put to work upon Hamlet, but he knows what they are about, he meets plot with plot, he not only thwarts the whole Court, but brings home to its various members the penalty of their deeds. Here Hamlet both knows and acts. If the first set of circumstances were incalculable, and paralyzed his activity, this second set are calculable, and arouse his activity. He foils the schemes against him—which is the sphere of what has been already called his negative action.

I.

Out of these two sets of external influences, and the corresponding reaction against each, the Hamlet Thread is spun by the poet. With all these elements in mind, we shall now follow it to the turning-point of the dramatic action, that is, through the First Movement.

1. The first set of external influences upon Hamlet begin with the conduct of his mother. Her marriage, especially with such a man as Claudius, so soon after her husband's death, has touched to the core the profound ethical nature of Hamlet, who feels that therein the family relation is essentially annihilated. He has to deny to his own mother all true womanhood; hence the moral world seems to him, the son, to be falling into chaos. Denmark has become a hell to him; "things rank and gross in nature possess it merely;" the success of villainy and the power of sensuality would drive him out of existence, if "the Everlasting had not fixed his canon against self-slaughter." So the moral law holds him fast at the start, and causes him to react inwardly against the external pressure of the world. But the burden of the conflict weighs him down with melancholy; moreover, a great wrong in his environment is crushing him, though he does not know what it is. Still he has an instinct of what has happened, a dumb presentiment, which is now to rise into a vivid image gifted with a voice.

The second of these external influences which come upon Hamlet is the Ghost, for which preparation is made in the very first scene of the play. It tells the terrible tale of his father's murder, and enjoins the still more terrible revenge. The motives for action are now complete; presentiment has become knowledge. The Ghost has been already discussed, but a few remarks upon its dramatic relations may be added. The easiest way of

getting rid of the difficulty is, no doubt, to take the apparition just as it is, without further troubling ourselves about the matter. We may say that the poet merely employed an existing superstition for theatrical effect. It may be held that it is used as a species of poetical machinery, somewhat as Virgil used the Grecian Mythology. Still, this will not do. Nearly all close readers of Shakespeare have the firmest faith that he never introduces supernatural forms without a profound spiritual signification. Another theory is that the Ghost was gotten up by somebody—say Horatio, or the soldiers, or persons not mentioned in the play; and there are several passages which, being read with such an opinion in view, are sufficient to excite an impression to this effect. Again, it is supposed by some, that the Ghost is a typical representation of Hamlet's suspicion, or possibly, that of the people—an objectification of the vague and ghost-like doubts, hintings, rumors of the time. Besides special objections against each of these views, there lies the general objection against all of them—there is no adequate ground stated for the employment of the Ghost. The poet has himself given us no solution of the difficulty, when a mere hint would have been sufficient. We may suppose, therefore, that he intended to leave his audience in the dark about the matter; that he designed to have them see just what Hamlet sees, and no more. He simply represents the Ghost as one of those external influences which are to spur Hamlet on to action. This is its function in the play, but the

secret of its origin must remain forever untold.

Its reality must be carefully observed; it speaks the truth; it tells what is nowhere else told in the drama; it gives the pathos to Hamlet, and furnishes the basis of his action; it acts quite the same, in this respect, as if it were no Ghost. There is no hint that it has falsified, and, in fact, the entire course and purport of the drama rest upon its statements in reference to the murder of the King and the faithlessness of his wife. We have seen how close was the relation between the character of Hamlet and the form of the Ghost; the latter is an external picture of what the man is inside. It has already been stated how he melts all reality into his own subjective shapes; how he conjures up all sorts of relations, doubts, possibilities, excuses—which may be called the ghosts of Reflection. Now, Hamlet mostly lived in this unreal, subjective world, where true existence turns to a shadow. The Ghost here means just this—an unreal form of a reality. It is the way in which a fact has a tendency to reveal itself to such a mind—a fact whose actual nature is entirely changed and colored by the mental medium through which it passes, and its real character is transformed into the unreal, ghostly.

There are, therefore, two elements in the Ghost, both of which must be kept distinctly before the mind—the real and the unreal; or, it is both objective and subjective, it exists in the world externally, and in the man internally. On the one hand, it represents occurrences which actually took place;

its utterances are true, and are taken throughout the play just as if they had been spoken by an ordinary character. Hamlet, to be sure, hesitates in one place to accept its statements, but that is only an excuse for deferring action. On the other hand, its form is unreal, ghostly, subjective—which form, is, as it were, the shadow cast from Hamlet's mind.

But how does the opinion here presented consist with the fact that others see the Ghost besides Hamlet? It is again to be noted with what care the poet guards the objectivity of the Ghost as one of its essential elements; for it is not only seen by others, but it is seen by others before it is seen by Hamlet himself. Not the least hint is given of its secret in the whole play, and its objective nature is most rigorously preserved. So great and so striking is the precaution of the poet, in this respect, that we cannot help attributing it to the most careful design. But what dramatic ground is there for such a procedure? A most excellent ground, and one that exhibits the profoundest conception of Tragic Art. *The poet wishes to involve his audience in the same doubts and conflicts as his hero.* He designs the apparition for us, too; we are to look upon it, as it were, with Hamlet's eyes, and, hence, must not know anything more about it than Hamlet himself. To be sure, we may not regard it with his trust; we may disbelieve entirely in ghosts; but thus the nature of his mind is revealed, and the chasm between his consciousness and our own is made manifest. Still further,

the audience must have the same problem before them as Hamlet; they must be assailed by the same difficulty—must be required to solve the enigma of the Ghost. Thus a character becomes tragic to the spectators when they are rent by the same contradiction which destroys the hero. If the audience stand above the hero, and comprehend all his complications and mistakes, we begin to enter the realm of Comedy.

Suppose the subject were treated otherwise. The poet might have dispensed with the Ghost, and had the news of the murder told to Hamlet, in a separate scene, by some spy who had secreted himself in the garden; but then we would lose the objective form which exhibits Hamlet's mind, though he might still be portrayed as vacillating. Again, the poet might have let the spectators into the mystery of the Ghost, while he kept it a secret to Hamlet; then the whole pathos of the character would be destroyed, for this depends upon the audience sharing in the same struggle as the hero. Such are the grounds upon which rests the justification of the poet in giving strong dramatic validity to the Ghost; for these reasons so many people in the play see it besides Hamlet; his mental characteristics are thus shown as they could be by no other means; finally, in this way the tragic element is brought out in its fullest significance, since the audience must solve the same problem, and is involved in the same difficulties as Hamlet.

We must also note his inner reaction against

this external influence. The Ghost commands revenge, which at first Hamlet accepts, and he will sweep to it "with wings as swift as meditation or the thoughts of love." But next we see him doubting: "the spirit I have seen may be the devil;" again his conscience has risen with its scruple. He doubts the morality of the Ghost with its revenge, and he doubts its reality; it may both tell a lie and be a lie. He even connects it with his own subjective condition: "out of my weakness and my melancholy" that spirit perhaps "abuses me to damn me." Clearly conscience is up in arms against the Ghost. Meantime another occurrence from the realm of Chance has wound itself into his existence—the actors have come. He drops the Ghost, and seizes the new incident:

The play's the thing
In which I'll catch the conscience of the King.

The third external influence is the company of actors. The connection of this part with the preceding is by no means remote. For the drama which they act is also not the reality, but only the representation of the reality. The Ghost is the dim, uncertain shadowy representation of the deed—the primitive conception; the drama is the clear objective representation of the deed in an ideal form, yet is not the real action itself. Now, the whole course of the play is to show the influences which spur Hamlet on to do the deed first enjoined by the Ghost, namely, to revenge his father's murder. Revenge means like for like;

Hamlet is to do to the King what the King did to his father. But he will first represent it on the stage, and then, he thinks, act it himself. Hence this play within the play is an intermediate link between the Ghost and the ultimate deed. It is also very characteristic of Hamlet that he is fond of the Drama; it pictures action, but requires none from him; so, in his mind, he loves to contemplate action, but hates to act.

These players are described quite fully in the drama, they are of Shakespeare's own profession, of which he takes occasion to unfold his ideas. In the histrionic art, Hamlet lays stress upon moderation, is averse to the strong effects demanded by the populace. Then in dramatic art he speaks of the excellent play which "pleased not the million;" that is the one from which he wishes to hear an extract. Such is the contrast between what is good and what is superficially popular. Do we not catch the poet here, breathing in an undertone concerning his own works? Moreover these actors have been compelled to wander by a stroke of fate, in which Hamlet finds an analogy to his father and his uncle. They drop into the action by chance, but Hamlet utilizes them in a scheme which goes to the soul of dramatic art, making it image the wicked deed, and thus elevating it into a kind of conscience which holds up before the guilty man his act.

Hamlet's changed demeanor has already excited the suspicion of the court, and all the characters of the play who are employed as instruments of

the King are set to work in order to worm out his secret. But the players have arrived; Hamlet calls for his favorite speech, entitled "The Slaughter of Priam." But why is this lengthy, and apparently irrelevant, declamation brought in here? Its point lies in the inconsolable grief of Hecuba, wife of Priam, who has just beheld the murder of her husband. Hamlet calls for it as furnishing an ideal contrast to the conduct of his faithless mother; contemplating it, he can get rid, for a moment, of the disagreeable reality around him, and of the pressing duty. Thus it is seen that this long insertion is in the deepest harmony with the subject of the tragedy, and bears, as a motive, directly upon Hamlet. But that which sets him on fire is the action of the player, who seems to be more influenced by a mere fiction than he himself by the most fearful actual occurrence. Bitter self-repoach follows, with apparently a new resolution. But a doubt rises; a reflection enters—the Ghost *may* be a deception; hence there is another deferment till he can catch the conscience of the King in a play. Nor can he do otherwise; for what is the deed told by the Ghost to Hamlet but a shadowy specter? So he doubts the deed which has been done, and doubts the deed which he is to do.

But the matter cannot rest here. The keen reflective Hamlet must know his own state. Already he has shown misgivings in respect to his ability to accomplish his work. Hence, when we next meet him—it is in the far-famed soliloquy on

suicide—he is perfectly aware of his mental condition, and seems to regard it as final, as something which cannot be helped. We have already pointed out the motive for self-murder which was frequently hovering before his mind. The subject again comes up in this connection, as he has now become conscious of his irresolution, and is still pressed on by the most fearful injunctions. What is he to do? Kill himself—let us first cast up the credit and the debit side of death. Death relieves us from all the natural shocks that flesh is heir to, from all wrongs—in general, from the whips and scorns of time; so much is clear gain. But hold! there is a dream-world beyond; there's the rub:

For, in that sleep of death, what dreams *may* come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.

Upon this bare possibility we shall forego all the acknowledged advantages of death. Hamlet has already declared that the external world was too strong for his frail individuality; he cannot resist the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but is prone to passively suffer all which collides with him. He sees that death is the only destiny of such a person. But what deters him from the act of suicide? The future state, which, whatever else may be said about it, is the land of shadows, of unrealities to the living man, for the simple reason that he has not yet realized that state, and cannot do so till after death. This realm, being so perfectly void, is a fine field for the imagination, since there is absolutely nothing in the way. Let no

one think that by these remarks we are doubting or denying the great doctrine of immortality; but this rests upon quite other grounds, namely, the rationality of man, and cannot be given by imagination. Hamlet, true to his character, assigns the greater validity to this specter of unreality. Whatever the future state may be to others, to him it is, and can only be, the land of possibilities. But the principal thing to be observed is that he is now aware of his own condition, and gives it expression:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.

Moreover, his moral nature also rebels at the idea of suicide, as it did at the idea of murder:

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.

The struggle of Hamlet against the King has thus become internal—against himself. The destruction of Claudius was enjoined upon him as the most sacred duty, yet he cannot bring himself to its performance, and is now conscious of the fact. What does he think of himself? “If I have not strength of individuality enough to do such a duty, then I have not strength enough to live; I am too weak to assert myself in this world of rude, buffeting tempests.” Such is his conclusion. But he can no more kill himself than he can kill the King, and for the same reason. It would be a contradiction if he could. Hence we see the same unreality, the same spectral excuses, coming up to forestall action in the latter case as in the former. So Hamlet remains still a living being, with the same

conflicts as before, which are now renewed with increased fury.

The play within the play succeeds perfectly, but has also had another result not so favorable to Hamlet. If the latter has now perfect evidence, the King also has become aware of the fact that Hamlet is apprised of his guilt. Consequently, more decisive measures must be taken to get rid of the dangerous dissembler. Preparations are accordingly made to dispatch him to England and there murder him. But this play has struck another chord in the King's character, which, on one or two occasions hitherto has shown some signs of life—conscience. The attempt at prayer, by the King, forms the counterpart to Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide. The King here has done the deed; his desire is that it should be undone. Note the steps; for we have in this passage the most complete exposition of the noblest Christian doctrine, and it is worth more than many volumes of Theology. He attempts prayer, which means he tries to place himself in harmony with the Divine Being—the rational principle of the Universe. But that Being he has offended, to the last degree, by his conduct, and there seems to be no reconciliation. But is there no hope? Yes, there is mercy for even the greatest criminal. How? First, by a complete repentance in spirit for the act; second, by surrendering all its advantages—that is, *you must make that undone which you have done, as far as lies in your power*. You cannot restore the dead, it is true, nor call back the past,

but you can do justice to the living by ample restitution. The spirit of man has this power: It can heal its own wounds; the Will can withdraw itself from its deed and say, "it is no longer mine." Such is subjective repentance. But this is not enough. There must be an objective correspondence, else it is not complete; the deed must be reversed; all gains and advantages must be unconditionally surrendered. Hence the King feels that he cannot be forgiven as long as he is still possessed

Of those effects for which I did the murder—
My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.

Verily, there is no way out but to make a clean breast of the matter, as we say with true metaphor; and, furthermore, he cannot buy off his own conscience—"there is no shuffling." What remains? Only the bitter demands of repentance. This he tries, and, moreover, essays formal prayer, but without success; he cannot repent. His crimes are too monstrous for him to retrace his steps. Can he give up his queen, his throne, confess the murder of his brother, renounce his plans against young Hamlet? It were to demand too much of poor human nature to expect it—yet such is the only way of salvation. Here we see the contrast between the two: Conscience keeping back Hamlet, yet spurring on the King; the one seeks to do, the other to undo, with the same inefficiency. In the one case, the deed smothers conscience; in the other, conscience the deed. Their actions pertain

to the same matter—the murder of the father, the marriage of the mother, the exclusion of the son from the throne. Hamlet is invoked to visit justice upon the man who has done these things; the King is urged by conscience to make them undone. The King refuses; so does Hamlet.

Perhaps there is no passage in Shakespeare equal to this one in grandeur of thought and in clearness and exhaustiveness of statement. The heart is kindled, and the mind is excited to the highest intensity, by its marvelous power. It may be called the Northern or Teutonic interpretation of Christianity, in distinction from the Southern or Romanic. That interpretation insists upon the moral content of religion, as distinguished from its external ceremonies and abstract dogmas. These are considered of no validity unless they make men good—determine their conduct. That a person can be a Christian and immoral at the same time is almost inconceivable to the Northern mind. But if we turn to Calderon, the greatest dramatist of Southern Europe, we shall find quite the opposite interpretation. In his drama called *Purgatorio di San Patricio* there is a direct contrast between these principles. Two characters are portrayed—one of which is good and upright, the other is the most desperate villain that can be imagined, having been guilty of adultery, murder, seduction of nuns—in fact, of quite every conceivable crime. Still, he has Faith, and is ready to lose his life in its defense, and, as a consequence, Heaven has vouchsafed to him many marks of

special favor. Both these characters, though morally direct opposites, are still Christians:

Pues aunque somos Christianos
Los dos, somos tan opuestos
Que distamos quanto va
Desde ser malo a ser bueno,

Here the antithesis is openly stated—it is not necessary to be moral in order to be a good Christian; Christianity and morality are divorced totally. In another drama, *El Principe constante*, there is portrayed the collision between Christianity and Mohammedanism. These two forms of faith are not made the basis of a distinction in character; on the contrary, the Moorish prince possesses all the qualities which command honor and respect in an equal, or even greater, degree than the Spanish prince. Now, it may be fairly stated that this would be no collision at all in Shakespearian art, or for the Northern consciousness. A Spanish audience would, no doubt, applaud the devotion to an abstract dogma, which is represented in this play. But an English or German audience would say: "If Christianity cannot make better men than Mohammedanism, it has no advantage; we would just as lieve be of one as the other." Herein lies the immense difference between Calderon and Shakespeare. The latter brings all religion back to its spiritual basis, and never rests in mere externality. How does it affect the character and conduct of men when they seize these religions as ends in life, and realize them in their actions? asks Shakespeare. His treatment of this theme can be

best seen in the *Merchant of Venice*, in the characters of Shylock and Antonio, where there is also portrayed a religious collision—that between Judaism and Christianity. But Calderon's main question is, "Infidel or Christian?" or, perhaps, it is more narrow still—"Catholic or non-Catholic?" If a man only believes in the true doctrine, he possesses the privilege of moral delinquency; for he has the absolute end of man—faith in a dogma. Morality is quite a subordinate, even indifferent, matter. But Shakespeare reverses these elements—dogmatic religion is subordinate to morality, or, rather, it has morality in the highest sense for its content. In the hands of Calderon, the act of formal prayer on the part of the guilty King would have been ample repentance, but Shakespeare demands something profounder than a mere genuflection.

The players have now done their work. The Ghost told the murder, but they have made the King himself, the guilty man, tell it over again. Previously it was unwitnessed, now the whole court can bear witness. The outer dramatic picture of the deed has roused the inner conscience of the doer. A voice from the world beyond it was, now it is a voice in this world. Hamlet glories in his success; Horatio, the well-balanced friend, confirms him. Still the great question remains: Will he now act? Listen to him:

Now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on.

Is this loud talk again to smother the rising scruple? Behold, here is the King at prayer: "now might I do it pat—and now I'll do it;" no, he will not; already it must first be "scanned," the reaction sets in afresh, then a reflection, an excuse, and again deferment. So even against the proven guilt—for Hamlet questions not the proof—he does not proceed; he finds a pretext under which he hides his moral hesitation. He is not clear that he ought to revenge the murder, if proven. Long afterwards, when his own life had been attempted by the same guilty King, he can still ask in doubt: "Is it not perfect conscience to quit him with this arm?" This is the trouble now lurking in his soul; so he reacts again internally, and the outer impulse from the scenic representation is paralyzed. But is it the last chance? No, there is one more, and here it is.

The fourth external influence is Fortinbras marching against the Polack. The connection between this occurrence and what has just preceded is to be carefully noted. The player exhibited the ideal world of action before Hamlet, but the representation was unable to incite him forward to the deed. There still remains the real world of action, which now appears in the person of young Fortinbras. What influence will this produce upon him? for it would seem to be the climax of incitement. Fortinbras is the man of action, and this element is brought into greater prominence by the small value of its object. The prize is a little patch of ground, not worth a rental of five

ducats, yet here is a youth who defies fortune to the utmost for its possession. The contrast strikes Hamlet in the most forcible manner. He has a father murdered, a mother debauched, a throne despoiled—and still he does not act. He resolves anew to perform the deed, but, as the sequel shows, with the same result as before. Here again he states his difficulty with all the energy of self-reproach; it is thinking too precisely on the event, while Fortinbras makes mouths at the invisible event. He confesses that he has strength and means to carry out his end; he can give no good reason to himself for his delay, but is inclined to ascribe it to cowardice—to his anxiety about consequences. It is the strongest example that could be presented to him, and we may suppose that, from the impression which it made upon him, he afterwards selects Fortinbras as the fittest successor to the throne. For we can well imagine that Hamlet now has the highest appreciation of a man of action.

The introduction of Fortinbras has been condemned by Goethe as an unnecessary part of the drama, but its presence can be justified on the strictest artistic grounds. Fortinbras is the man of action, but something more—he is the man of action as the head of the State. He is inspired, in the highest degree, with the sense of nationality. The elder Hamlet had contracted the bounds of his country, which it is the first great object of his ambition to win back, but he is overborne by higher authority. There remains the expedition

against the Polack to vindicate some ancient right, or avenge some wrong, from which he returns apparently victorious just at the death of Hamlet. Thus he is seen on all sides asserting his own nationality against external countries which in any way collide with the same; he seeks the full recognition of his people abroad, and is quite ready to subjugate other lands to the strong national spirit which he has aroused. Such a man is a ruler, at least in the most essential sense; he obtains absolute respect for his country without, and strengthens the national spirit within. Herein he stands in direct contrast to Hamlet and the King. They employ their time at home in plotting each other's murder, yet both are afraid to perform the act. The House of Denmark, therefore, goes down in its effete representatives, and the true ruler takes their place.

Thus the play has a positive solution. Most tragedies end with the death of the colliding characters—a merely negative result—which would be the case here were the part of Fortinbras left out. The Danish princes perish because they are unworthy of their dignity, and are succeeded by one who has shown himself to be a sovereign in the highest sense. The play, therefore, begins with Fortinbras (at the second scene), and ends with Fortinbras; his activity is the frame in which its whole movement is set. Thus the poet has portrayed him as the absolute contrast to Hamlet, and made him triumphant, at the close, as the man of action. How much, therefore, must the thought of

the poem lose by the absence of this character? When we consider also the additional reason for its introduction—that it forms the culmination of that series of external influences which it is the plan of the drama to unfold—the objection of Goethe would seem to be entirely groundless. For Hamlet must have also the real world of action come up before him to incite him to the deed. Hence this character is an integral and indispensable part of the play.

It would now be advantageous to turn back and review for a moment the four external influences which have been mentioned, and observe their gradation. The hasty marriage of the mother is the first one, wherein Hamlet only surmises. In the second, which is the Ghost, the whole affair is revealed, but in a dreamy, spectral way. The declamation of the actor on the subject of Hecuba, and the subsequent play, constitute the third; it must not be forgotten that the matter is something feigned—not real; the story is a myth; instead of action, it is action represented. The fourth influence—the expedition of Fortinbras—is the deed itself, which now appears before him in its full reality. But neither the representation nor the reality can bring him to the point of action. It is evident that the last and highest effort has been expended, and from now on the nature of these influences and the character of Hamlet must change.

In these four external influences we may find a correspondence to the four internal Hamlets—the

instinctive, imaginative, moral, and reflective Hamlets. To the outer world is related an inner world, the two must be seen together. This correspondence, though it may not hold in every detail, is true in general, and is worthy of being noted by the reader who wishes to get all the harmonies out of Shakespeare. The instinctive Hamlet, with his "prophetic soul," foreboded the whole truth from the conduct of his mother. The imaginative Hamlet is he to whom alone the story of the Ghost can be told. The moral Hamlet, with his conscience, is the one to "catch the conscience of the King" through the players. The reflective or intellectual Hamlet is the one to appreciate the deed of Fortinbras, and to make the keen self-introspection, which we find in his—properly fourth—soliloquy. Thus the four internal Hamlets and the four external influences are a correspondence of the inner and outer worlds; moreover both move together in gradation upward to the culminating point which has already been reached.

But what is Hamlet to do now? Kill himself—but that is impossible; he can no more kill himself than kill the King. The question of suicide was settled, as will be remembered, in the well-known soliloquy on that subject. He can only let come what comes, defending himself, perhaps, against the attempts of others; but the great aggressive act, which includes all acts, must remain unperformed. But what is about to come? The consequences of even what he has already done

are rapidly returning upon him; the King, goaded by suspicion, has resolved upon his destruction; Laertes, the avenger of Polonius' murder, is near at hand and crying for his blood. The external influences are no longer mere examples brought forward to incite him to action, but he is now involved in their meshes; they seize hold of him and carry him along irresistibly in their movement. At this point he must experience the bitter fact that he is controlled by something outside of his own intelligence, upon which, hitherto, he has had the firmest reliance.

2. We are now to go back and bring up the second set of external influences which come upon Hamlet—those from the Court. They are the Calculable, as the first set was the Incalculable; they come from a limited circle of people, while the first set came from the vast world outside; the one set is the plan of men, the other the plan of Providence, who however, is masked in the guise of Chance. Hamlet is, accordingly, able to meet and foil this second set; here he is not paralyzed, as he was in the first set, but is rather aroused to a wonderful activity, which, however, is not the doing of the positive deed, but the thwarting of the deeds of others.

The conflict between Hamlet and the Court reveals to us chiefly the external Hamlet. Here he acts a part, and takes pleasure in the acting of it; he assumes a mask, the mask of lunacy, which the King seeks in vain to penetrate. The acted Hamlet is the external Hamlet, who thus hides in

a disguise the internal Hamlet with his bitter soul-conflicts. The Court is turned loose upon him, as he says, to "pluck out the heart of my mystery;" he throws his mask among them, which breeds an absolute confusion in the courtly mind concerning the question of his insanity. But the courtiers cannot reach his inner secret; they remain caught, more or less, in his outward appearance, in his disguise; many a reader too, of the play has thus been caught.

This conduct of the courtiers is not simply nullified, it is also punished; every person who dares become an instrument of the King has his deed brought back in some shape. Hamlet not merely foils the intruders, but he turns their souls inside out; he becomes a mirror of conscience to his mother and to the King; others he brings to destruction. While they are all trying to ensnare him, he has really ensnared them; he is their fate, and his own too. Let us now follow the courtiers trying to fathom the "something o'er which his melancholy sits on brood."

The first action of the Court against Hamlet is to detain him at home from Wittenberg. Since the death of his father his conduct has excited suspicion, he confesses to have "that within which passeth show;" moreover the King is quite ready to suspect on account of his own guilt. The young Prince is to be watched and his secret is to be found; his response to the King's design is the plan of feigning insanity—the outer garb to mask the inner struggle.

Next, the King sets to work all his instruments. The man of cunning comes first—Polonius, whom Hamlet befools worse than any other courtier, slashing him to pieces with his sarcasm, and, at last, running him through behind the arras, though this was an accident. Love is made an instrument against Hamlet in the person of Ophelia, who, true daughter of Polonius that she is, is ready to betray her lover, but he catches her in the act, and, in terrific scorn, reads home to her the lesson of her infidelity: "Get thee to a nunnery." Though she thinks he is mad, she has herself received the sting of madness in her own soul, and will end in insanity, though this, too, was an accident, that is, not intended by Hamlet. After love, friendship is turned against the Prince, in order to find out his mystery. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, youthful friends, lie in wait for his soul's secret, but are foiled, made to confess, and, for a final interference, are sent to death by Hamlet in a moment of impulse. He is veritably destiny to the person who interferes with him. The nearest human tie, maternal affection, is also pressed into service against him; his own mother is made to join the instruments of the court in the attempt to probe her son's heart. Yet not his heart, but her own is reached in the trial:

O Hamlet thou hast cleft my heart in twain!

He is himself a man of conscience, it is his own deepest conflict; he well knows how to set up its mirror in another soul:

You go not till I set you up a glass
Where you may see the inmost part of you.

He succeeds, for listen to her outcry:

O Hamlet, speak no more;
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct,

Yet not thus will he leave her, but he points the way out of her present condition:

Confess yourself to heaven,
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come,

The great duty of repentance is again inculcated; it is the only means of shunning a tragic fate. Here we note the correspondence with the prayer of the King, who also considers the nature of repentance, to which he likewise has been brought by Hamlet, having had a mirror held up to his soul in the little play. Thus, both to King and Queen, Hamlet becomes a conscience which has revealed themselves to themselves; nay, he becomes a call to repentance, which both, however, reject.

II.

We have now arrived at the turning-point of the drama; here begins the Second Movement of the Hamlet Thread. A change takes place both in the external influences or environment, and in the character of Hamlet. The outer world of Chance, the Incalculable, now seizes him, inasmuch as he does not seize it; hitherto it came upon him to drive him to action, but without effect; now it whirls him into its current, and bears him on; if he does

not transform the world through his deed, the world will transform him through its happenings. The King has decreed that he must go to England, and he obeys the decree, having his own plan therein; but the Incalculable sweeps in and foils both him and the King, bringing him back to Denmark.

Herewith his conviction changes. He accepts this incalculable element as the final arbiter, and so abjures his own intelligence. He will no longer resist it; accordingly, his inner reaction against external influences quite ceases in this Second Movement. His soul-struggles do not wholly disappear, but they quiet down to the pensive meditation of the grave-yard, for the most part. Impulse can still inflame him, but he hardly attempts to bring himself to do the deed. He resigns himself to the outward power of circumstance, in which he finds his divinity, but to his divinity he immolates his free-will. A great change, certainly; a change which is the forrunner of this tragic destiny. He gives up, as it were; a series of incidents now determine him within and without; he becomes a believer in Fate, nay, in a double Fate, namely, inner caprice or impulse, and outer accident—the Fate in the man and in the world. Previously he resisted external forces, and they could not drive him to action; henceforth they rush forward with him to death.

The second set of influences—those of the court—still continue to be directed against him, but he no longer tries to thwart them. The King still plots, but Hamlet does not counterplot. What is

the use? Thus even his negative action—his foiling the work of others—essentially ceases in this Second Movement; he lets the external influence carry him whither it will; for does he not now believe in Fate? Just herewith is coupled his end; the King, no longer thwarted by Hamlet, can succeed in a plot against his life. Laertes, too, appears, in whom Hamlet beholds his own deed returning. Finally, if activity be life, what remains for him but death?

It will be seen that the Second Movement has not, as a whole, the fullness and variety which we saw in the First; it sympathizes with its theme, which is the decline of the man into inaction and nothingness. In this decline we have three different pictures of Hamlet in three different environments. Thus the change of structure in this Second Movement corresponds to the change of thought; Hamlet, no longer reacting inwardly and outwardly, becomes almost passive, and is shown, in panoramic fashion, as the central figure of the three successive pictures.

(1.) First comes the capture of Hamlet by the pirates, and his sudden return. He is upon the high sea, when Chance suddenly puts forth her hand and turns him back. It is a most strange occurrence, and has always given great difficulty. Accident, contrary to the general rule of the poet, seems, in the most startling manner, to determine the course of things, and the whole poem is made, apparently, to rest upon a most improbable event. Hamlet is sent to England; a pirate pursues his

ship and grapples with it; he boards the strange vessel, when it suddenly cuts loose with Hamlet alone, and afterwards puts him safely on shore. The whole proceeding is so suspicious that, were such an event to occur in real life, everybody would think at once of collusion. This impression is much strengthened by the confidence with which he speaks of his ability to foil all the machinations of the King in sending him to England.

—Let it work,
For 'tis the sport to have the engineer
Hoist with his own petar; and it shall go hard
But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon.

Indeed, he rejoices in the prospect:

—O, 'tis most sweet
When in one line two crafts directly meet.

Note how absolute his trust still is in his intelligence. Such confidence seems to be begotten of preparation. One is inclined, therefore, to explain the occurrence in this way: Hamlet hired the pretended pirate, and gave to its officers his instructions before he left port; indeed, he must have had also some understanding with the officers of the royal ship which was to convey him. Yet this view, apparently so well founded, we must at once abandon when we read Hamlet's account of the affair (Act. V. Scene 2.) In that he ascribes his action wholly to instinct; there was no premeditation, no planning at all. But what is more astonishing, he has come to prefer unconscious

impulse to deliberation; he has renounced intelligence as the guide of conduct. Yet, before this event, how he delighted in his skill, in his counter-plots, in his intellectual dexterity!

Now, what is the cause of this great change in his character? In the first place, it ought to be observed that the expressions above quoted were uttered by him when there might be still some hope of being brought to action, before the last and strongest influence—the appearance of Fortinbras—revealed to him that his case was desperate. But the great cause of his conversion was this startling event, in which he saw that Accident, or some external power, was mistress over the best-matured plans of men. Here an element appears suddenly that had never been included in his calculations, upon which, heretofore, he had placed so great reliance; suddenly they are swept down by this unknown force. He sees that it is objectively valid in the world, but he knows that he himself is not, for he cannot do the deed; hence he must believe in it more than in himself. Hamlet thus becomes a convert from Intelligence to Fate, from self-determination to external determination. So must every person without Will be, to a greater or less extent, a disbeliever in Will; for his sole experience is that man is controlled from without. Thus it can be seen that the introduction of this accident is based upon the weightiest grounds, and is in the completest harmony with the development of the drama. Accident appears here in a manner which is legitimate in Art—not to cut a complicated

knot or to create a sudden surprise, but to determine character.

(2.) Now follows the second picture, showing another most remarkable, yet strictly logical, transition. This man—whose irresolution has become an intellectual conviction; who has even renounced his belief in action and made himself the puppet of chance; who has thus, as near as possible without suicide, stripped himself of a real existence in the world—in what environment next shall we find him? In the grave-yard, alive; for, as before stated, he cannot destroy himself. Thus he is brought to the very abode of death, without entering the door. The grave is that bit of earth which contains man when he absolutely ceases to act; he is laid away in it when his body can no longer assert itself, but becomes the prey of the elements. Reality ends there, and possibility begins.

But Hamlet is still alive, and, hence, not yet ready for this final resting-place. Now, for the living, the grave-yard, above all other localities, is the home of meditation; every one feels this influence within its borders; each small mound calls up an infinitude of possibilities. The hum of the actual world is removed, and the future here strikes into the present and absorbs us into itself for the moment. But the future cannot be *realized*, for, when it is real, it is the present. Hence Hamlet, with his subjective, contemplative nature, must find in this spot a most congenial theme for his reflection; he will not be annoyed by the bustling activity of the world, nor pushed on by any neces-

sity to do his deed. All external influences seem removed.

But even the grave-yard—the end of activity—has still an activity of its own, and must also furnish a contrast to Hamlet, which will be seen to disturb him. It is an humble calling, though none the less real—we allude to the grave-diggers. They seem to have an air of indifference and nonchalance which ill accord with the character of the place, and even grate somewhat upon the feelings. But this is just the point; grave-digging is their daily occupation, which they go about unhesitatingly; and again Hamlet beholds men who practically fulfill their calling, however humble and repulsive it may be. Thus the common laborer is also brought in with his lesson; for the low estate of these grave-diggers appears to be strongly emphasized by the poet. To their simple minds the great forms of the world are quite devoid of content or meaning. They talk of Christianity and Law with the most grotesque formality, which becomes the more ridiculous by their attempted adherence to formal Logic. One is inclined to say: A fit place for all such forms when they have lost their inner substance—the grave-yard. It is here shown how the ignorant rabble must regard the highest concrete truth; it loses its entire spirit, and degenerates into an empty formalism. So these grave-diggers exhibit their mode of viewing the great questions of the world, but they soon come down to the more congenial element of banter and jest, and, at last, to the gross appetite in a stoup of

liquor. One of them is humming a ditty of youthful love, while at work, when Hamlet appears. O the harsh contrast! "Hath this fellow no feeling of his business, that he sings at grave-making?" No, Hamlet, no; that is his business, which he goes to work at and does without thinking any more about the matter. Still another blow is given to Hamlet by the grave-digger. The man who confounded and befooled the court with his quibbles is now beaten at his own game by one of the humblest of mortals. He has proscribed his own intellect; his intellect proscribes him.

It was stated that the grave-yard is the home of meditation. The mind looks in two directions, and feeds itself upon its own contemplations—forward into the future when it pictures to itself the world to come, and backward into the past when its principal theme will be the transitoriness of human power and glory. The former has been fully considered by Hamlet in the soliloquy on suicide, and, hence, cannot be repeated here. The latter—transitoriness—comes now in its turn, and, consequently, we find Hamlet indulging in those gloomy reflections in which his melancholy and contemplative nature takes so great pleasure. He is in the presence of extinct individualities; imagine what they were—behold what they are. He runs through the scale, dwelling upon the lawyer with sarcastic delight, and loading him with quibbles and gibberish as if to smother him with his own lumber; also recounting with exquisite pathos his boyish remembrances of the clown, Yorick. Mark

the difference of style between these two passages, and see how absolutely Shakespeare adapts the form to the subject. Finally, Alexander and Cæsar, the mightiest men of action of the past, are called up, judged merely by their transient bodily existence, and found to be—dust. We need not speak of the positive and eternal principle in these towering individualities—that they are now living, and will live forever, by their deeds in the history of the world; but this is a fact which the contemplation of Hamlet must ignore, since it dwells upon the negative, finite element of humanity. Hamlet has thus passed from the presence of the living hero, Fortinbras, to the presence of the dead hero, Alexander; and a corresponding transition is made in his own character. For, if Fortinbras, with the pressure of the real world, cannot excite him to activity—if his conviction is that man is swayed solely by external forces, then there remains nothing for him but the grave-yard, whither he may go and dwell in contemplation, and, finally, have his deedless body stowed away there in the earth. This last state, we may rest assured, cannot now be far off.

With Alexander and Cæsar he must stop; he cannot go higher; hence, at this convenient moment, there passes by the funeral procession of Ophelia. The old affection rouses in him the dormant man, sudden emotion sways him, and once again we behold the impulsive Hamlet. Moreover, her death is an indirect consequence of his conduct; Nemesis begins to work. But what shall

we say to this grave-scene? It is certainly extravagant, but perhaps justifiable, through the participating characters. Laertes, in accordance with his hasty nature, leaps into the grave of his sister and indulges in the wildest grief. But Hamlet follows him, and even surpasses him in extravagance! Hamlet here again acts from his emotions and impulses; the love for Ophelia, and the circumstances of her death, return upon him like the rush of an overwhelming ocean, and bear down all moderation. He for once is mad, as every such man is momentarily mad; he says, he forgot himself. It is our opinion that he does not here feign madness; the motives thereto seem absent; the King knows his secret designs, and he must know that the King knows them. It is the love and death of Ophelia which furnish the cause for this extraordinary spectacle.

There is another contrast in this scene which is too striking to be omitted. Every one speaks with the greatest tenderness and affection of the sweet Ophelia; in the memories of all she is embalmed in love and peace. But there is one exception—the priest. He has no share in the general sorrow; he would even exclude from the rites of decent burial the frail maiden who has lost reason and life together. He is thus placed with the clownish grave-diggers—not only in the character of adherence to empty form, but also in the special subject of conversation, for their discussion is about the Christian burial of one that has committed suicide. Ophelia is laid to rest; Hamlet's acts are beginning

to return upon him in his intense sorrow; but a deeper thrust is at hand, for he has already been brought face to face with the avenger.

Thus the impulsive Hamlet has appeared to us again; but in the next scene we are once more introduced to the reflective Hamlet, who intensely self-conscious and introspective, knows and describes his new condition. This takes place in the conversation in which Hamlet tells Horatio the circumstances of his escape. He attributes his action wholly to instinct and presentiment; and now, for the first time, he indicates fully the great change which has come over himself. He ascribes to accident, and not to any pre-arranged scheme, the rescue by the pirates; still, in accident, he hints the providential plan. On board the vessel he acted from a secret, irresistible impulse; behold the result. This event has changed his whole view of the world. Hitherto his faith in intelligence was unbounded; his confidence in his own ability to counteract all hostile schemes had never failed; even when he is told that he must go to England, he, with exultation, declares:

But I will delve one yard below their mines
And blow them at the moon.

But this strange accident upon the sea has changed his entire way of thinking. Now he believes that often indiscretion serves better than the profoundest deliberation; that destiny rules the hour; that there is an extra-human

agency which overrules the activity of man:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

In a later passage, just before he goes to fence with Laertes, he enunciates the same doctrine in a stronger form. Thus Hamlet abjures Intelligence, which he thinks has been so baneful to him; he resigns himself into the hands of Fate, outer and inner Fate—external chance and internal impulse; he is now ready to obey the first prompting of his soul, as well as to yield to the first impact of the world. We have before attempted to show that this conversion of Hamlet to a belief in destiny was a necessary consequence of his intellectual point of view, for he has now become acquainted with something possessing objective validity, of which his subjective spirit is able to give no adequate account, and which it does not possess. Hence he comes to believe in external determination—in action without forethought. Thus, under impulse, he commits the forgery which sends to death the two royal messengers; but true to his old character, he can still ask the question whether he ought in conscience to slay that King whom, in addition to the other crimes against him, he has just caught laying a snare for his destruction.

(3). But the final consummation, the last transition—that from the grave-yard to the grave—is at hand. Osrick, in the absence of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, comes to invite Hamlet to fence with Laertes. This courtier is described in full—

more fully, perhaps, than his importance warrants. Hamlet we see here at his old tricks, with his love of sly, obscure satire, which confounds his victim, and comes near confounding his reader. We cannot get his exact meaning, but we do perceive very distinctly the drift; it is directed against the person at hand, who is too dull to comprehend it, as was seen in the case of Polonius. Osrick exhibits the hollowness and formalism into which everything had fallen; it is a drossy age which has lost all substantial worth, contrasing thereby with the deep moral nature of Hamlet. But the match is agreed on, though Hamlet still has presentiments. Here he falls into the trap; and one thinks, if he had been as shrewd now as upon former occasions, he would not have been caught. Undoubtedly the plan against Hamlet is not more profound than many others which he has seen through—why, then, should it succeed? For the reason that Hamlet's view of the moral order of things is changed; he no longer believes that man can determine anything; one act is as good as another for bringing about a result; whether he goes or declines is all the same in the eye of Fate. Hence he resigns himself to destiny, and the cautious Hamlet blindly proceeds to what comes first. He even refuses to obey instinct now, and surrenders himself wholly to chance: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the readiness is in all."

The two combatants are brought together. Ham-

let begs pardon of Laertes, and declares that all the wrongs done by him to Laertes were the result of madness. This means merely impulse—the momentary absence of reason—else we must suppose Hamlet guilty of wanton falsehood, and, besides, destroy the whole meaning of the poem. Here is found the motive for Laertes' generous candor at death, when he discloses the infamous scheme of the King. So they are reconciled, yet they fall by each other's hand; they are incited not so much by *personal* grievances against each other, as they are the avenging instruments of Wrong. Nor must we omit to mention the absolute logical precision and necessity of this mutual destruction; for the poet himself has reminded us of the fact, lest it might escape our notice. Hamlet, the son, is seeking revenge for a father slain. But he slays Polonius, who is also a father, and thus commits the very crime whose punishment is his sole object. In being an avenger he calls up against himself an avenger, who is, therefore, the son of Polonius—Laertes. The execution of his revenge thus involves his own destruction, and, moreover, the special manner of his destruction. But Laertes, too, must perish, for he also has willed murder, and he becomes the instrument of the murderer of a father, though he is himself seeking to avenge a father's murder.

It will be observed that these deaths at the end of the play seem to be accidental, though, to a certain extent, brought about by the plan of the King and Laertes. They, too, are involved—

a result which they did not expect; but the sensuous side must have always an element of accident, because it is externality. What we must look for is the logic of these deaths. Have the persons done that which justifies their fate? Do their deeds imply destruction when taken in a universal sense? In other words, have they only been overtaken by justice, by the irrevocable consequences of their acts? For art must exhibit the deed in its completeness—in its return to itself. If we examine the actions of the various persons swept away in the course of this play we shall find that all have done something which deserved death—that the idea of Retribution is imprinted on every character. Each one has willed that which, by logical necessity, involves his own destruction. Nor has the poet failed to express this thought repeatedly. Laertes seems so impressed with the notion of Retribution that he states it three times:

Orrick.—How is't, Laertes?

Laertes.—Why, as a woodcock to mine own springe,
I'm justly killed with mine own treachery.

Again:

—The foul practice
Hath turned itself on me; lo! here I lie,
Never to rise again.

Speaking of the King:

--He is justly served;
It is a poison tempered by himself.

But even here Hamlet can only act under the spur of impulse; angered by what Laertes tells him, he

rushes up and stabs the King, just as he slew Polonius. Hamlet perishes, and we see impulse in its results. Rational action alone can be moral, for it can distinguish its objects. Hamlet confesses that he was wrong in killing Polonius, and regrets it; still, he must bear the consequences of his deed. It is now brought home to him through the son—Laertes.

Hamlet's dying request to Horatio is to report his cause aright, that a wounded name might not live behind him. Thus, at the very last breath, we see a manifestation of that beautiful moral nature, which desires that its motives be set right before the world. Moreover, he gives his dying voice for Fortinbras, the man of action, as the sovereign most suitable for ruling his country. And we hope that it will not seem wholly fanciful to the reader if we point out a deeper signification in this last injunction to Horatio: It means the writing of this drama. For how else can the desire of Hamlet be fulfilled—to have his story told to the world? The poem, therefore, accounts for itself; Horatio is to be poet, and he even states the argument of his work in his conversation with Fortinbras. These are the words:

And let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about, so shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forc'd cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook,
Fallen on the inventors' heads.

Thus ends the greatest of plays, with Fortinbras

and Horatio—ruler and poet—master of the actual world and master of the ideal world; the former is the chief actor, who moulds the reality; the latter is the thinking artist, who transmutes the reality into the transparent forms of Beauty. In this way Shakespeare has given a positive solution to the collision, and has also accounted for his drama; indeed, he has included himself and his part in his work.

CHAPTER THIRD.

THE KING'S THREAD.

In the previous chapter the external influences were shown, the object of which was to incite Hamlet to action. In them we saw the character of Hamlet reflected in a great variety of shapes, yet having always the same essential basis. Here is found, undoubtedly, the leading element of the play. But to this action there is a counteraction, which springs from the Court. We saw, in the First Movement, that Hamlet's obstacle was chiefly in himself; that he could not force himself to do the deed, though the most powerful impulsion from without was urging him forward. Then comes the external opposition, which seems trifling compared with the internal resistance. The King and Court are upon his track, yet how easily are

they baffled! He could sink them all, were he at one with himself. Hence the internal collision is the main one in the play.

The King is, however, the person with whom Hamlet carries on the external conflict; the others are the instruments of the King. Here we find a series of characters—Polonius and his children, the Queen, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—who have the same end that the King has, or, at least, all of them are means for the execution of his purpose. Hence they are more or less remotely involved in the same destruction. Hamlet has no such instruments, for the reason that he must first make up his mind to accomplish the deed before he can employ them—which resolution, if he makes it, is out of his power of realization. The only character on his side is Horatio, a friend from the University, and a foreigner, whose chief function is to know the plans and motives of Hamlet, and to be present at the leading events, since he is to be the poet of this drama, and the vindicator of Hamlet's conduct. Thus he hovers over the poem from beginning to end, without much definiteness of character, and without saying or doing hardly anything beyond what is necessary to indicate his presence. He acts principally as a foil to exhibit Hamlet's designs and motives. When the latter has not Horatio to talk with, he has to talk with himself about his affairs; hence the predominance of soliloquy in this play. Hamlet's encomium on Horatio cannot be gainsaid, though it has to be taken largely on faith; it is very interesting, however, as

showing what Hamlet admired, if he did not possess:

For thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing—
—Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee.

It is otherwise with the King; he can act, and has acted, and, hence, knows the use of instruments. The course of his action is twofold—first, to discover the cause of Hamlet's melancholy; and second, when he has made that discovery, to get rid of the man with such a dangerous secret. The presupposition of his conduct, and, in fact, of the play itself, is a previous crime—the murder of Hamlet's father, by which he came to the throne. The curse is at work from the start; suspicion against the son of the murdered King harasses his bosom, which suspicion is intensified by the strange demeanor of the son. Here the struggle begins. To find out what is the matter with Hamlet—to discover whether he knows the secret of his father's murder—is the first great object of Claudius; for this purpose the characters above mentioned are introduced. But they, too, are to be judged by their deeds; the law of responsibility applies to them also. Hamlet, on the contrary, carefully avoids detection; to cover his thoughts and plans more effectually, he throws over them the night of lunacy. We have already shown, in the first part of the present essay, that this disguise was especially adapted to deceive Polonius,

whom, on account of his reputation and position, the King was sure to set on Hamlet's track. It is to be observed that the King was shrewder than his minister. He did not believe that Hamlet was crazy, from the start, though evidently putting a great deal of faith in Polonius. Thus arises that peculiar and dexterous struggle, in which Hamlet seeks to conceal his thoughts and purposes, and the King tries to discover them. The culmination of this counter-movement is when Hamlet, by his "play within the play," shows that he is aware of the great secret. Here is the point where the conscience of the King is aroused; the most fearful struggle rends his bosom; he knows not whether to retrace his steps and repent of his old crime, or to retain his wife and realm by committing a new crime. At last he resolves upon the latter, and, hence, his object now is to get rid of Hamlet. For both these purposes he uses as instruments those persons whose characters are now to be given.

Let us recall the grouping of the characters as it has before been indicated. The first set is the King and Queen, who have a common principle in their conscience-conflict, which has been roused in both by Hamlet. Both, in great distress of soul, are brought to consider repentance; both reject it. Hamlet himself is linked to this set also by his conscience-conflict, though it proceeds not so much from commission as omission. The House of Denmark thus centers spiritually in a common trait: all its members in their guilt show conscience, which goads them to consider repentance, the un-

doing of the guilt, as the means of escape; but they all reject repentance and perish. Does not this reach to the very heart of the Christian world? It may be fairly placed to the credit of Danish royalty, that it is capable of conscience.

Specially, in reference to the character of the King. He is exhibited in no absolutely depraved light by the drama; he is not a bloody tyrant who proceeds from murder to murder, like Macbeth, but he endures a good deal from Hamlet, so much so, that he gets into trouble with Laertes for his leniency. He drinks too much, in Hamlet's opinion, to which we give our assent. But he seems to desire to live and reign honestly from this time forward, provided there is no reckoning for the past; Hamlet, he has declared, shall be his heir; also, his calmness and self-possession, in very trying circumstances, win our favorable regard. Moreover, he shows, repeatedly, strong compunctions of conscience for his crime; he wishes the act undone, if it occasion no loss to him. He is, therefore, an extreme example of that large class of people who seek to repent of their misdeeds, yet desire to retain all the profits thereof. Still, he has good personal reasons for not proceeding with open violence against Hamlet, namely, his fear of the people, who idolize the young Prince, and the affection of the Queen for her son.

Thus the King also has two collisions—the external one with Hamlet, and the internal one with himself. The latter is most powerful; he has committed a crime which he seeks, yet is unable, to

make undone without its undoing himself; repentance involves his death, since he must confess his crime to the world and surrender all its advantages, namely, his kingdom and his queen, and then submit to the penalty of the law. Repentance thus seems to him to annihilate the very end for which it exists, and to become self-contradictory; for, if it destroys men, thinks he, what is the use of their repentance? To repent is death; not to repent is death; he wills to do, yet not to do. But he cannot stand still; his deed is upon him; he has to bolster it up by a new act of guilt. He now commences plotting against the life of Hamlet, who, at last, falls through his machinations. Thus crime begets crime. His retribution, however, comes in full; he perishes by the hand of him whose death he has sought and whose father he has slain.

The Queen has been disloyal to her husband, but probably not a direct participant in his murder. She has violated the very principle of womanhood, and has destroyed the ethical basis of female character. Excepting the charge of infidelity made by the Ghost and the intimations of Hamlet, we have no declaration of the exact nature of her crime. Considering the important part she plays in the action, and the great influence which the King confesses she has over him, one is inclined to see in her a principal in the murder—a second Clytemnestra. But it must be confessed that the poet has left the precise nature and degree of her offense in great uncertainty, and assuredly with design; yet

few readers, perhaps, have any doubt about her being an accessory, in some way or other, in the murder of her husband. The reason why the poet has thrown a veil over her guilt is that he was unwilling—in fact, unable—to make Hamlet play the part of Orestes, the slayer of his own mother. It would not comport with the character of Hamlet, nor would it suit a modern audience; and, still more, it would disturb the course of the play, which demands the concentration of his revenge upon the King. If he could not kill the King, much less could he kill his own mother. His revenge is to call up her conscience and emotional nature—to show the tremendous chasm between herself and the truly ethical woman; for thus she would be harrassed by her own feelings more than by any punishment, since it is emotion which forms the leading characteristic of her nature. The Queen dies; for she has violated the principle of her rational existence—fidelity to the family relation. The man who corrupted her purity mixed the draught which deprived her of life; and the former was more truly destructive than the latter. But she loves Hamlet with the affection of a mother; the maternal relation is more powerful than the marital.

In connection with the Queen a question of some interest arises concerning the reason why she does not perceive the Ghost when it is seen and addressed by Hamlet (Act III, Scene 4). The common supposition seems to be that the poet desires to indicate that it is merely a subjective

ghost, and some critics have gone so far as to recommend its entire banishment from the stage in this scene. The poet, however, introduces it, and makes it address Hamlet in this very passage. We cannot think, therefore, that he intends to destroy all the work which he was so careful hitherto in doing, namely, the preservation of the objectivity of the Ghost. It seems to us that he merely intends to show that it does not lie in the character of the Queen to see ghosts. But Hamlet sees them, and this forms one of the great distinguishing elements of his nature. Nobody besides himself ever sees the Ghost, if we except the soldiers and Horatio in the First Act, and they are made to see it for the purpose of rendering it real to the audience, and not to exhibit any fundamental principle in their character. The difficulty is to preserve the objectivity of the Ghost to the audience, and, at the same time, not to let it appear to those whose characterization would be thereby distorted. That the Ghost lies wholly in Hamlet's imagination, if the Queen, though present, does not see it, is a very natural inference; but the point is that the poet, instead of intending to call up that inference in the minds of his audience, would have every eye behold the Ghost in its reality, as being Hamlet's great problem. The Ghost is certainly inside of Hamlet, and outside of him too, but there is required a ghostly eye and ear to see it and to hear it. Such the Queen does not possess.

The second group of characters is made up of the family of Polonius, father, son, daughter.

They have a common trait which binds them together, as well as contrasts them with the royal family. This trait goes back to the moving thought of the drama—conscience. Polonius and his children show no inner questionings, no qualms of guilt, no tendency to repentance, such as we have noticed in the royal personages of the play. We may call them the conscienceless set; the great spiritual movement of the time has not entered into them; once or twice only can we see that it brushes them a little uncomfortably. They show no pang for the deed, they offer themselves as ready instruments to the guilty King, without inner conflict or reaction. Of all three this is true, though their characters in other respects are different.

The father, Polonius, is the leading instrument of the King against Hamlet; his life has, apparently, been devoted to reading the secret thoughts of others, and concealing his own. In him we see the shrewd diplomat; and we cannot help thinking that the poet drew this character from the Italian diplomacy of his own and preceding ages. Base motives Polonius appreciates; but he does not recognize the moral law in himself, nor in others, nor in the world. For this reason he totally misunderstands Hamlet, whose moral nature is the essential part of him.

The fundamental characteristic of Polonius is cunning—cunning as the absolute basis of conduct. Now, cunning is not to be eschewed within its proper limitations; but, when it is made the highest

rule of action, it must necessarily assail, and attempt to subordinate, the ethical principles of the world. For, if it is the highest, Right, Morality, Religion, are inferior, and must be disregarded. Such, in general, is the character of Polonius, which age and long habit have so confirmed that it is seen in the most trivial affairs of life, and makes him often have a decidedly comic tinge. Cunning thus becomes anything but cunning; it destroys itself. He does not believe in an ethical order of things, or, rather, is totally ignorant of the same. The world is governed wholly by adroit management, according to him; the externals of life—conventionalities—are the most important element of knowledge. This is seen in the parting advice given to his son: excellent precepts for external conduct, but, on the whole, a system of selfishness, whose germ is “to thine own self be true,” which here means the narrow individual. Note that there is no allusion to moral principles as the guides of human conduct; in fact, we learn, in another place, that he would even be pleased to learn of the moral derelictions of his son, as the “flash and outbreak of a fiery mind.” Moreover, he has no faith in the sincerity of Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, or, really no faith in love at all; in his judgment it is lust, with ulterior designs.

Such a man stands in direct opposition to Hamlet; the latter, therefore, has for him, not only dislike, but also the most unqualified contempt. Polonius has no comprehension of such a character. Hamlet worries him by dark sayings, which

have always a secret sting, and utterly confounds him at his own game. It would almost seem as if the poet meant to show the folly of cunning—how it completely contradicts and destroys itself. Polonius sends Reynaldo to Paris to look after his son, and gives some very shrewd instructions. At first one is inclined to ask, if he cannot trust his own son, why should he trust his servant, and who is to watch the latter? For the basis of his conduct is distrust. But what is the use of the information when he gets it? None at all; for he allows to his son those very vices which he sent Reynaldo to observe. Also, in the play we hear no more of the matter; this scene is, therefore, simply to show the leading trait of Polonius.

His object, then, is espionage, for its own sake; management—not for any end, but to be a managing; he thus plays with his own cunning. Polonius has now reached that interesting stage of mind when he delights in cunning for its own sake, and seeks the most tortuous path when a straight one is at hand. This crookedness extends also to his language, which, before it comes to the point, takes a dart to one side and loses itself in its own prolixity. Now, such a man is set to work to ascertain the secret of Hamlet, whose nature lies outside of his intellectual horizon. How completely he is befooled is evident enough; the old fellow is compelled to confess that his cunning has overreached itself in thinking that Hamlet's love for his daughter was fictitious; and he feels sorry that he had not "quoted him with better heed and judg-

ment," for, after all, he was very willing for Hamlet to be his son-in-law. In this respect it is also curious to observe his duplicity towards the King, for to the latter he professes to have broken off the match for reasons of State. Finally, it is his own cunning which brings him to sudden death, through his concealment behind the arras. Cunning thus destroys itself.

This brings us to consider the ground of his death, which is often thought to be harsh and repulsive, and, in addition, an unnecessary incident in the play. The first question to be asked is, has he done anything to merit such a fate? Undoubtedly; for he has shown himself the willing instrument of the King in all the schemes against young Hamlet; and it is hinted that his present influential position is owing to the hand he had in the conspiracy against the elder Hamlet. Polonius has, therefore, merited the retribution which has come. But is Hamlet justified in killing him? Undoubtedly not. Hamlet acts upon impulse; makes a mistake which brings, ultimately, retribution upon himself at the hands of Laertes. Though Polonius may deserve death, yet Hamlet cannot rightfully be the executioner; hence guilt falls upon him. All this is expressed by Hamlet himself, who fully appreciates his situation, and declares his repentance for the act:

--For this same lord
I do repent, but Heaven hath pleased it so
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I should be their scourge and minister.

Here he states that he was the instrument for the punishment of Polonius, and that the murder of Polonius was the instrument of his own punishment. The death of Polonius is, therefore, not an accident in the play, in the sense that it is not motivated beforehand; it also shows how Hamlet can act from impulse before reflection sets in, and that such action plunges him into the deepest guilt. Acting from impulse, he slays the wrong one, but, as a rational being, he must be held responsible for his deed. Another distinction should be kept in the mind: Polonius is a subject, and, hence, amenable to law; while the King, as the fountain of justice, is above law, and, hence, can be punished only by murder.

Punishment must now be inflicted on Hamlet—but by whom? Here appears the avenger Laertes, the son of Polonius, in accordance with the strictest retribution; for Hamlet is seeking revenge for a father slain, yet has himself slain a father, whose son, according to his own logic, must now rise up and try to kill him. Laertes is a chip of the old block, with the difference of age. For what the young man tries to carry by storm and impulse, the old man tries to obtain through cunning. Both are equally devoid of an ethical content to their lives. How much they are alike, and how completely Hamlet's character lies outside of their comprehension, may be seen in the advice which both give to Ophelia concerning Hamlet.

The first fact which is brought to our notice about Laertes is his request to return to France,

which fact is an offset to the desire of Hamlet to go back to Wittenberg. We have already shown the importance of this stroke in the life and character of Hamlet. Equally important and suggestive is the statement concerning Laertes. It indicates that he sought and possessed the French culture, in contrast to the German culture of Hamlet. The French have been in all times noted for the stress they lay upon the externalities of life. In whatever pertains to etiquette, polite intercourse, and fashion, they have been the teachers of Europe, and have elaborated a language which most adequately expresses this phase of existence. But it must be said that the perfection of the External has been attended with a corresponding loss of the Internal—that the graces have too often not only hidden, but extinguished, the virtues.

In this school Laertes has been educated, and herein shows a striking contrast to the deep moral nature of Hamlet. He has, therefore, the advantage of not being restrained by any uncomfortable scruples, and here again the contrast with Hamlet is prominent. Laertes can act. Yet he proceeds from impulse, though he has sufficient cause for anger; hence he, too, is on the point of killing the wrong one, just as Hamlet did in the case of Polonius. That Laertes is ready to destroy the whole ethical order of the world in his revenge—that his nature is quite devoid of the great moral principles of action, is shown in the following words of his:

To Hell, allegiance! vows to the blackest devil!
Conscience and grace to the profoundest pit!
I dare damnation. To this point I stand—
That both the worlds I give to negligence,
Let come what comes, only I'll be revenged.

No doubt he is now in a high passion, but this is just his characteristic. Here he openly abjures conscience, religion, fidelity—the very basis upon which the moral system of things must rest. Yet we find that, in the end, he does acknowledge one controlling principle, the emptiest and most worthless of all—honor, which, however, does not prevent him from entering into a rather dishonorable conspiracy with the King against Hamlet. Such is Laertes; yet he is not without a generous, gallant element in his character. Witness at his death the forgiveness which he asks of Hamlet. He dies because he has willed the death of Hamlet, which, though merited, he cannot inflict as an individual. Moreover, he assails his own principle in becoming the instrument of the King against Hamlet; for he, the avenger of a father, is aiding the murderer of a father against just such an avenger as himself. His act, therefore, logically involves his death; also, he is a subject, and must resort to the court of justice; he has not the excuse of Hamlet for the murder of Claudius, since the King, being the source of justice itself, cannot well be subsumed under his own creature.

Ophelia too becomes an instrument against Hamlet, through her father. She is one of the fairest of our poet's creations, whose very beauty lies in her frail and delicate nature. We feel

from the first that she is too weak to endure the contradictions of life; that a flower so tender must perish in the first rude storm. She has little individuality of her own; she is wholly wrapped up in the father and lover; her reliance upon others is absolute. Now comes the rudest shock which can assail a woman; both props are torn from under her, and there remains nothing for her support. Her lover goes crazy—for that is her belief—and slays her father. Her mind has no longer any center at all, because it has none in itself; insanity during a short time follows, and, ultimately, death by accident; for she was dead in thought, but could only perish by accident, since she was crazy, and, hence, irresponsible. Her snatches of old songs exhibit the working of memory and imagination, without the controlling principle of reason; she runs into licentious fancies, superinduced, no doubt, by the previous conversations of Polonius, Hamlet and Laertes. Here we have an undoubted case of destruction without guilt; but, as before remarked, in the case of Hamlet, a certain degree of individuality is the very condition of existence; no one can live who cannot endure the conditions of life. Ophelia perishes through her beauty; that which constitutes the strongest charm of her character is what makes her greatest weakness. We may contrast her with Portia, who possesses the side of strong individuality without losing her ethical character or true womanhood. But Ophelia is all trust, all dependence; there is in her hardly a trace

of selfishness or self-reliance even; she can think of herself only in her losses. Hence the sweetness, beauty, and loveliness of her character; but, alas! hence also its utter frailty.

Still, we must see that Ophelia is a true daughter of Polonius, a decided sense of duty is not her possession; she belongs, by birth and character, to the conscienceless set. She allows her father and brother to dishonor the fair name, and sully the motives, of her lover, without active protest on her part, though she knows well that "he hath importuned me with love in honorable fashion." She manifests no assertion of love as a duty, which is its triumph; for there is a conscience in love, which the best men and women recognize and follow, against obstacles heaven-high. Here the obstacle is the parent, over whom Shakespeare always makes the strong-hearted daughter victorious, if there be no other element of conflict. Doubtless she loves Hamlet; but hers is the passion of love without its conscience. Moreover, she loves him for his externals; he is "the glass of fashion and the mould of form;" he has "the courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword;" though she speaks of his "sovereign reason," which, she thinks, is overthrown, she has no appreciation of his deep soul-struggles, which are hid under that cloak of insanity. His moral nature finds no response in her; she permits him to be wrongfully besmirched, sends back his tokens, and, finally, betrays him while loving him. Yet all this she does in obedience to parent, which thus becomes the

test of her character. Still Ophelia is not bad, she is weak, obedient and beautiful.

Once more let us summon before ourselves the total movement of the play. Its presupposition is the crime of Claudius, who has murdered the King, corrupted the mother, and usurped the realm. This calls up the son, who is to requite both the murderer and the faithless mother. It is the object of the son, first, to discover the truth of the guilt, and, secondly, to avenge the same when discovered. It is the object of the King to find out the plans of Hamlet, and then to make way with him when he has found them out. Hamlet has the assistance of one friend—Horatio; the King has the assistance of a number of persons connected with his court. The previous crime is the central point from which the two counter-movements of the play take their origin; the action of the King and Hamlet respecting this crime gives the essence of their conduct and character. Both exhibit negative phases of the ethical deed; the one refuses to do it at all, and, hence, never reaches any positive act; the other commits a crime—that is, destroys the Ethical—and then refuses to make the crime undone. It is at this point that we can see that the delinquency of both is the same: each refuses to perform the ethical deed—the one, because he will not act; the other, because he will not repent; or, to use a figurative contrast—the one, because he will not go forward; the other, because he will not go backward. Nor must we forget the other side, which gives the internal collision. Both have

a justification for the course which they pursue—the one, because through action he would be compelled to commit a crime; the other, because through repentance he would have to sacrifice his life. To force Hamlet to action the External, in the form of a series of influences, is brought to bear upon him; to force the King to action the Internal—Conscience—wields her power. But, in the one case, the External is baffled by the Internal, in the shape of Reflection and Conscience; in the other case, the Internal is baffled by the External, in the shape of worldly power, possessions, and ambition.

But now the reader himself must undertake to complete these interesting contrasts, and to work out the further details of the drama. It is, no doubt, the profoundest of Shakespeare's plays in respect to its thought, and its collision seems to touch the very core of modern spirit. The Theoretical and the Practical, Intelligence and Will, are here exhibited in their one-sidedness, and it is shown that neither is sufficient by itself. If the play has any moral, it would seem to be that the man who refuses to translate his thought into deed is as great a criminal, or, at most, possesses as little power of salvation within himself, as he who will not undo his own deed when it is wicked.

Moreover, this play stands alone in the fact that it quite touches the limits of the Drama itself. For the essence of the Drama is to portray some form of action; but here that form largely is non-action; hence the plan of the play, and the

necessity for those external circumstances which were detailed in a previous section; for they must be external, since the character is essentially passive. The work thus marks the outlying boundary of Shakespeare's poetical activity, and exhibits the broadest range of his genius. The rest of his dramas depict collisions of various kinds, but it is the nature of the collision to be between higher and lower forms of Will. But here he quite sweeps the whole field of the Will, and makes it one of the colliding principles. He thus produces the most comprehensive of all dramas, and seems to exhaust the very possibilities of Dramatic Art.

. Let us beware, then, of making Hamlet too limited, too finite. We must have noticed that the horizon of his character is so vast that one is apt to get lost in it, or to take some fragment of it for the whole. But, what is even more difficult, it is full of antithetic tendencies; it cannot be confined to one direction; every trait seems to be re-acting against itself, and changing to its own opposite. No sooner do we see some limit to his character, than we find him storming against that limit, and trying to get beyond it. To take our old example, when conscience puts its restraint upon him, he turns to revenge; but when revenge becomes a limit, he goes back to conscience. It is true that most of Shakespeare's great characters have this same double tendency; they are shown as limited in some direction, but that is not the whole of them, they are also limit-transcending, striving after the beyond; they are, indeed, finite, but have

in themselves the opposite of the finite—the infinite. But above all Shakespeare's characters, Hamlet is the limit-transcending spirit, which can never rest in its own bounds. He is the thinking man, and it is the nature of thought to be, not a part, but the whole, to be not the limited, but the unlimited. The Finite and the Infinite are thus commingled in Hamlet, as in every human being; but the Infinite is by far the stronger tendency; earthly bounds satisfy him not, the limited deed here vanishes into the unlimited thought beyond. The Ghost coming from that world beyond and holding communication with him is the deepest symbol of his character. It is no wonder that it will speak to nobody but him. Hamlet, though he has definite tendencies, which are to be marked, must not be reduced to the definite simply, for his nature is to throw down his limits and be as infinite as Thought.